

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

## Preliminary Strategic Business Case



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On behalf of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

Version: 2 (9 April 2026) – with a minor correction compared to version 1

**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

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Version 2: author Peter West OBE 9 April 2026 – with a minor correction compared to version 1

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### **Disclaimer**

The author of this document cannot vouch for the correctness of third party sources quoted, but has put particular emphasis on official statistics such as those from the Office for National Statistics, local authorities and the Office of Rail & Road. Conclusions drawn in the document are explained and are based on a cautious, sober assessment of options and contextual information. Such conclusions at the early stage of development of this document are necessarily provisional and it is recognised that other legitimate conclusions could be drawn. The document has been produced to aid decision-making and is intended for that purpose alone. It is the start of the analytical approach to decision-making through the various stages of business case described in the Introduction below, not its conclusion. The views expressed in this document are those of the author alone, even where comments have been accepted from other parties, and do not purport to represent the views of the members of the Northern Devon Rail Development Alliance, whether individually or as a group nor Network Rail or Great Western Railway as corporate entities.

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### Foreword

#### The Purpose and Shape of this Document, and Background to the Scheme

Few travelling on the railway line between Exeter and Barnstaple who have also experienced a fully modern railway such as the Elizabeth Line or the fully modernised regional and rural routes found in many parts of continental Europe would recognise the Barnstaple railway as falling into the same category. That statement is not intended to denigrate the work done by Great Western Railway, Network Rail, local authorities, the Devon & Cornwall Community Rail Partnership, the Tarka Rail Association (now the North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group - NDLRPG) and others to make improvements. The route is far better than it would otherwise have been, but the scope for further material improvement without more fundamental investment is now limited<sup>1</sup>.

Against this backdrop, the present document reviews options for modernising the railway line between Exeter and Barnstaple. It focuses on present day and future needs and benefits including into the longer term delivered by the train service operated. The aim is to create a reliable modern train service operating on a key piece of modern infrastructure, with the mobility and wider benefits that that could enable. It is presented as part of a wider programme of transport improvement in Devon and the South West. There are explicit synergies with other elements of such a wider programme, including the potential extension of Barnstaple rail services to Bideford and Digby & Sowton, other rail infrastructure schemes and improvements to other modes, including active travel, bus, digital ticketing, electric vehicle (EV) charging and better mobile connectivity. The document places the scheme proposals within the wider context of place-based needs in Northern and Mid Devon with reference to Exeter too.

The conclusions drawn at the early stage of development of this document are necessarily provisional and it is recognised that other legitimate conclusions could be drawn. The document has been produced to help start the process of decision-making and is intended for that purpose alone. It is the start of the analytical approach to decision-making through the various stages of business case described in the Introduction below, not its conclusion.

The scheme has already attracting considerable local interest and enthusiasm. That is positive and shows that the scheme is a genuinely local initiative to solve local issues. However, the present document aims to be a sober assessment of options and potential benefits. A risk for schemes of this sort is that benefits are magnified and downsides and risks diluted. That is not the intention here.

Network Rail and GWR are undertaking work on ways in which the route's infrastructure might be modernised, in particular focusing on updating signalling/control systems and level crossings, possible improvements to line speeds and looking at ways in which more passing places might be provided with a view to improving operational performance, increasing the number of train services and reducing journey times.

However, Network Rail and GWR have not so far attempted to create a business case in the formal Five Case Business Case format. This document starts that process, noting in particular that the Mid Cornwall Metro, which has broad similarities of project scope, has attracted funding from a non-rail source<sup>2</sup> on the basis of socio-economic need and benefits set out in the formal structure of a business case<sup>3</sup>. This document also investigates a wider scope of potential interventions, including consideration of improvements to usability in the widest sense of that word at the stations, and bringing the route into the digital age.

The Government's guidance on investment business cases followed here makes it clear that the full business case approach must be followed when seeking funding. Even if those requirements did not exist, a formally constructed business case is a convenient format to record the arguments in favour of interventions and to explore what an initial menu of improvement options might look like. It also allows the arguments to be presented so that non-specialists at the various bodies that need to be involved and the wider stakeholder community can understand the technical railway-orientated discussions. This document is therefore purposely written with more background explanation for the benefit of readers with a non-technical background than is

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<sup>1</sup> The NDLRPG is campaigning for later trains from Exeter on days other than Friday, earlier Sunday services from Barnstaple and additional timetabled calls at some request stops. If achievable, these could be valuable enhancements to the current timetable, but still remain less fundamental than the fuller scope of modernisation investigated in this document.

<sup>2</sup> The Levelling Up Fund.

<sup>3</sup> Seen by the author, but not at present in the public domain.

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typical for a formal business case at the Strategic Outline Business Case stage. The document follows the Five Case Business Case format mandated by the Department for Transport and HM Treasury.

Decisions remain to be taken on the scope of potential engineering and other interventions and whether all the items included in the menu of options should be taken forward. The financial and economic analysis needed for full Economic and Financial Cases is therefore not possible at this stage. A full SOBC would need to be developed should a decision to progress the scheme further be taken. The five 'cases'<sup>4</sup> are:

- “The *Strategic Case* - sets out a robust case for change that demonstrates how the proposal has a strong strategic fit with the organisation’s priorities, government ambitions and the area(s) in scope – the ‘strategic dimension’
- The *Economic Case* – demonstrates the value for money and the best choice for maximising social welfare through options appraisal – the ‘economic dimension’
- The *Commercial Case* – illustrates the commercial viability and supply-side capacity for the proposal – the ‘commercial dimension’
- The *Financial Case* – demonstrates the proposal is financially affordable – the ‘financial dimension’
- The *Management Case* – sets out the proposal’s deliverability through the effective development of plans, management and resources to oversee the project from outputs to outcomes – the ‘management dimension’”

The Department’s guidance explains that “a holistic approach should be taken when developing business cases as the five dimensions are thoroughly connected and indivisible. Therefore, each dimension should not be considered in isolation.” This document highlights cross-references between the different cases, not least because the five-case structure will be unfamiliar to some readers and it will therefore not always be clear where some considerations will be found.

The Department for Transport mandates business cases to be taken through three stages:

- The Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) is the first formal stage;
- The Outline Business Case (OBC) is used to decide if funding can be justified to develop a detailed scheme design of the preferred option; and
- The Full Business Case (FBC) is the final stage for a successful scheme, forming the basis for a decision to be taken whether to fund and deliver the project.

While not itself one of the business case development stages, the Department for Transport now normally also undertakes post-implementation review of benefits for its larger schemes.

An important argument in favour of this Preliminary Strategic Business Case lacking developed economic and financial cases is the fact that the Department has put increasing emphasis on the importance of the strategic case for early stage decision-making on potential investments in recent years<sup>5</sup>. This increased emphasis on the strategic case is reinforced in the *Green Book Review 2025: Findings and actions*<sup>6</sup> published by HM Treasury in June 2025 and the subsequent revised *Green Book*<sup>7</sup> itself. The *Green Book Review* concludes that there is “continued over-emphasis on BCRs in decision making”. The Government statement accompanying the revised *Green Book* explains that: “The new guidance will support fairer and more balanced decisions on investment in every part of the country, including outside London and the South East and across urban, rural and coastal communities.” The revised *Green Book* includes a range of approaches intended to ensure fuller consideration of the strategic merits of schemes.

Another conclusion of the *Green Book Review* is that many “business cases typically answer the question “what is the best way to undertake this project?”, rather than “what is the right project to improve growth in this area?”. This is summarised as: “Insufficient emphasis on place-based objectives”. This document seeks to avoid that trap, with substantial analysis of local place-based issues and how a rail-based scheme could help address

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from the Department for Transport’s *Transport Business Case Guidance*, 16 December 2022.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Green Book supplementary guidance: Value for Money*, March 2022: “Options can either ‘achieve’ value for money or not based on a holistic view of benefits and costs as summarised in Box 18, but can never be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ value for money based solely on quantified costs and benefits separate from considering the SMART objectives.”

<sup>6</sup> HM Treasury, 11 June 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/green-book-review-2025-findings-and-actions/green-book-review-2025-findings-and-actions>

<sup>7</sup> HM Treasury, 5 February 2026: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The\\_Green\\_Book\\_2026.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The_Green_Book_2026.pdf)

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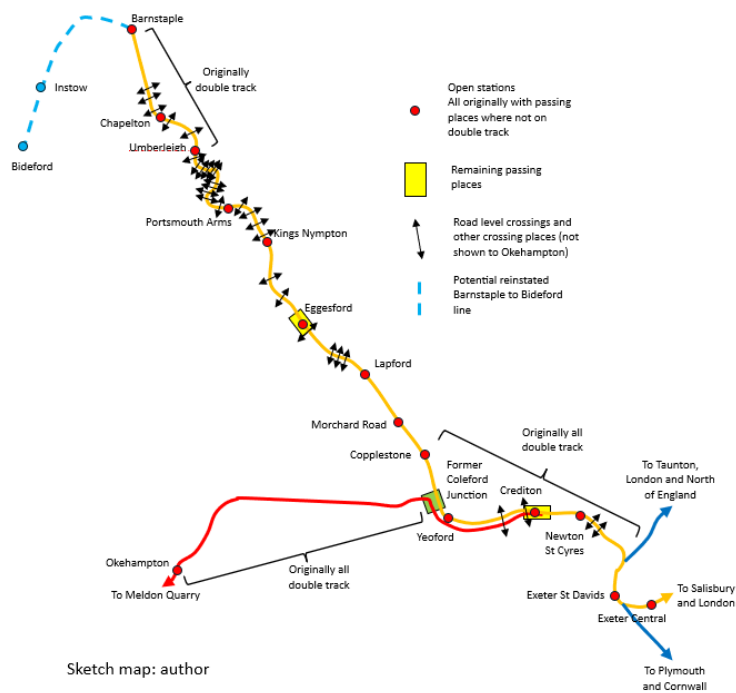
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them. In particular, it aims to start the articulation of what the *Review* describes as the need for “a compelling case for change”.

Effectively, the strategic case answers the question ‘is the proposed scheme something that should be undertaken and, if so, why?’. That means the initial focus is on the strategic arguments, including clear objectives. Given that Northern Devon, Torridge and Mid Devon rank very low in a range of national social and economic indicators, this document follows the structure recommended in the Department for Transport’s guidance on levelling-up elements of transport schemes<sup>8</sup>.

### Decline in status of the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route and reduction in infrastructure capability

Unlike the railway lines beyond Barnstaple to Ilfracombe, Bideford/Torrington/Halwill and Taunton, the 1963 *The Reshaping of British Railways* report (‘Beeching Report’) did not identify the Barnstaple Junction (now



Barnstaple) to Exeter line for railway for closure to passenger services. However, one of the consequences of the closures that did take place was that the route ceased to host through London to Ilfracombe train services and through carriages to Torrington from London. Eventually, all longer-distance through train services to Barnstaple ceased in 1982.

The line to Okehampton closed for passengers in 1972. The line via Bideford closed for china clay freight traffic in 1982. The remaining freight traffic was also lost from Barnstaple, from Lapford and from Meldon Quarry via Okehampton. All these changes meant that the line effectively became a long passenger-only branch from Cowley Bridge Junction in Exeter. It had long since lost ‘main line’ status.

At the line’s fullest extent, the sections of

the route between Exeter St Davids and Copplestone and between Umberleigh and Barnstaple had originally been double track. On the single line section in between all the intermediate stations at Morchard Road, Lapford, Eggesford, Kings Nympton and Portsmouth Arms had passing loops where trains could pass.

Against a backdrop of severe financial constraint, in order to reduce renewal, maintenance and operational costs and in recognition of the loss of freight traffic and reduced passenger use, British Rail carried out drastic rationalisation of the route north of Cowley Bridge Junction in Exeter, where the line leaves the main line from Paddington. This resulted in the loss of all double track and most passing loops, with passing places only remaining at Crediton and Eggesford. All signal boxes with the exception of Crediton were closed. The Okehampton line diverged as single track at Crediton rather than at the former Coleford Junction four and half miles to the north. The formerly three-platform Barnstaple station was reduced to a single line and platform with some sidings for occasional use by engineering trains. Engineer’s sidings were also retained at Crediton.

Most station buildings were either sold to private owners or demolished. As a single platform sufficed at most stations, the additional platforms and their bridges and other access points were taken out of use and in some cases removed. Goods yards and other land was sold off or adapted for railway materials storage.

Effectively, the route was relegated to a regime of ‘managed decline’ for several decades, with sufficient maintenance and renewal to ensure that track and other assets remained safe. There was little vision of what the line might achieve and therefore little of the active modernisation seen on some other parts of the national

<sup>8</sup> Department for Transport, *Transport Business Cases: The Levelling Up Toolkit*, February 2022.

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network, with modern signalling and improvements to track allowing speed increases, journey time reductions and more train services to operate.

One positive outcome of this neglect was that it spurred the creation of the community rail movement, with the creation of the forerunner of today's Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership. This and the Tarka Rail Association (now North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group) have worked hard to improve the train services and facilities on the route, with many successes due to their campaigning and other activities.

Since it took on responsibility for the route, Network Rail has undertaken a greater level of maintenance and renewal activity, replacing much traditional jointed track with continuously welded rail, upgrading the safety of many crossings and undertaking other investments. However, the line has not been prioritised for modernisation of the sort that would fundamentally transform it.

Since the line's nadir in the 1980s and early 1990s, the frequency of train services has increased substantially from the 9 trains per day Monday to Saturday and three on Sundays operated by British Rail in 1992 to an hourly service seven days a week (up to 18 trains per day for Barnstaple). A two hourly service to Okehampton<sup>9</sup> has operated via Crediton since November 2021, increasing to hourly in May 2022.

While the severely rationalised Exeter to Barnstaple route infrastructure was adequate for the low level of train service operating in the early 1990s, it means that the infrastructure now limits the number and speed of train services which can operate and determines that typical day-time journey times are substantially longer than the best achievable when no other trains are operating. With the addition of the Okehampton train services, the route sees the maximum frequency of train service which can be operated during current operating hours.

The longest trains normally operated prior to 2022 were two coaches long. Since the lengthening of a number of shorter platforms, this has increased to three coaches or four coaches, but that is still inadequate for the busiest trains, with regular reports of passengers left behind. There is little scope to increase the number of trains and there are constraints on operating longer trains, while at the same time the route is seeing very strong growth, outstripping the best pre-COVID figures. In contrast, many other parts of the country have seen declines in passenger usage since the pandemic.

The line suffers from poor punctuality and reliability, with the severely rationalised network limiting options for restoring performance following an incident. The line is also affected on a less frequent but still regular basis by more extreme disruption caused by heavy rainfall leading to sudden, extended precautionary route closures.

For the route's physical length journey times are extended. The inflexibility of the rationalised network leads to a substantial difference between the very best journey time achievable when only one train is operating on the route and the longest journey times during the busiest times of the day.

The trains usually used on the route by GWR are elderly, dating from the early 1980s to 1992. Even the more modern Class 175 trains due to be introduced onto the route date from 1999/2000. Many intermediate stations have poor accessibility for disabled people, little or no car parking and poor accessibility for pedestrians. The stations have not entered the digital age, with no digital ticketing such as pay-as-you-go or wi-fi. The route as a whole suffers from poor mobile connectivity and therefore poor on-train wi-fi.

Since the 1960s, both Britain and its railways have changed enormously. New railways have been built, new stations have opened on existing railways and some previously closed railways have been reopened. Across the country, many routes see far higher speeds and other operating changes and new rolling stock have allowed journey time reductions. The cases in favour of those investments have highlighted the value that rail can provide, often alongside greater value being attached to walking and cycling as 'active travel' options. A well-known example of route modernisation on the Chiltern Line from London Marylebone station<sup>10</sup> saw a route which had been threatened with closure and conversion into a bus/coach road transformed into a high-performing main line with vastly more passengers using it. More recently and closer to Devon, the Mid Cornwall Metro has seen many elements of modernisation brought to the Par to Newquay line, in the near future allowing more frequent train services operating through to a wider range of destinations in Cornwall, improved stations and with better access to them from the public domain, and digital pay-as-you-go ticketing.

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<sup>9</sup> A limited summer Sundays-only service funded by Devon County Council had operated for a number of years before.

<sup>10</sup> An initial phase under British Rail, followed by the 'Evergreen' schemes led by Chiltern Railways.

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### Devon County Council's Success in Promoting Rail Investment Schemes

Investment in local/regional rail services has long been and remains a key part of Devon County Council's transport policy. New stations at Ivybridge and Digby & Sowton opened in July 1994 and May 1995. In 2011 Devon County Council and Torbay District Council published the 'Devon Metro' proposals, a combination of investment in new stations, reopened lines and frequency improvements to existing train services (image and text source: Exeter City Council).



The Devon Metro has proved remarkably successful and has been matched by few similar local authorities. New stations at Cranbrook, Newcourt and Marsh Barton have already opened, 30-minute local train frequency on the Paignton line introduced, the Okehampton line reopened<sup>11</sup>, and Okehampton Interchange new station<sup>12</sup> is under construction. Reflecting a focus on how the railway can best serve Devon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the new stations at Digby & Sowton, Cranbrook, Newcourt, Marsh Barton, Edginswell and Okehampton Interchange are at locations where no previous stations had existed, serving new needs and markets. Funding for Cullompton station was confirmed by the Department for Transport on 8 July 2025.

#### Short term aims

- 4 car trains in the peaks
- New stations at Cranbrook, Newcourt and Marsh Barton
- 30 minute local service frequency on the Paignton line

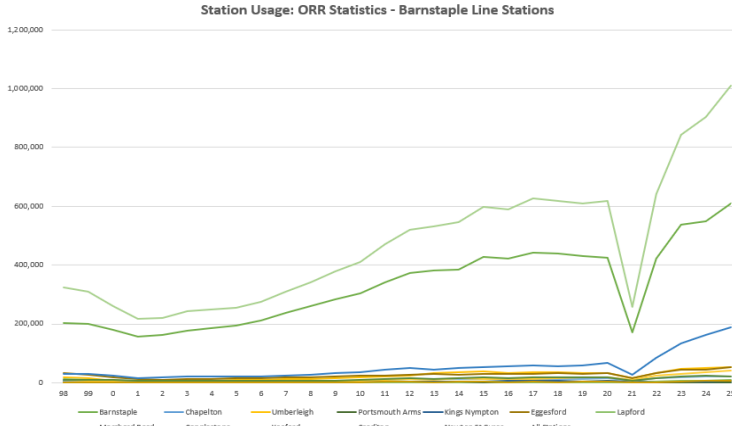
#### Longer term aims

- 30 minute frequency to Cranbrook, Honiton and Axminster
- Further new station at Hill Barton

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, including local authority and rail industry members, was established in March 2024. Its aims are the modernisation of the railway line between Exeter and Barnstaple and the reinstatement of train services to Bideford. The new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>13</sup> says that Devon will: "work with the rail industry to enhance the North Devon Line to address overcrowding and improved connectivity between northern Devon and Exeter, and explore feasibility of the North Devon Line extension to Bideford."

### Strong Post-COVID Rail Usage to Barnstaple and in the South West of England

In many parts of the country rail demand remains below pre-COVID levels, in particular where longer-distance commuting to office-based jobs has been displaced by increased home-working. In contrast Office of Rail & Road (ORR) usage statistics show that the Exeter to Barnstaple route has performed particularly well, both longer-term and post-COVID (chart: author based on ORR figures).



Road (ORR) usage statistics show that the Exeter to Barnstaple route has performed particularly well, both longer-term and post-COVID (chart: author based on ORR figures).

Against this backdrop, this document examines options and arguments for the modernisation of the railway line between Exeter and Barnstaple within a context of a period which has seen a renaissance of rail in Devon and with a usage trend that suggests that rail is likely to continue to flourish in the future. With

the new Local Transport Plan supporting many elements of a Barnstaple route modernisation scheme, now is a good time to review options for next steps.

Given the wider social benefits that modernising a rail route can address, given that Devon County Council has a successful record in improving the rail network and given that train services in Devon and the South West continue to be well used and grow strongly even after the COVID pandemic, Devon should be seen as a place in which there should be confidence in investing in rail.

<sup>11</sup> A limited summer Sunday-only service had previously been funded by Devon County Council.

<sup>12</sup> 'Okehampton East Parkway' on the Devon Metro map.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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### Executive Summary

#### Key points

- Strong post-pandemic rail growth: Devon is a place for confidence in rail investment;
- Very weak socio-economic conditions in Northern Devon and Mid Devon and transport peripherality are key problems modernising the Exeter to Barnstaple route can help solve;
- The likely level of capital cost and project timescales are realistic aspirations for Devon;
- Strong synergy with separate, complementary schemes to:
  - Replace GWR's old fleet of diesel multiple unit trains;
  - Increase train service frequency increase across Exeter to four trains per hour between Exeter St Davids and Digby & Sowton and build a new station at Monkerton; and
  - Extend the Barnstaple route by reinstating train services to/from Bideford.
- As part of a vision for a complete modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple line, a range of options have been identified, including the following potential improvement outcomes:
  - The Exeter-Barnstaple rail route provides an important contribution to improved sustainability of transport connectivity for Northern Devon, Mid Devon and Exeter;
  - Materially faster typical journey times, with a fastest journey between Barnstaple and Exeter St Davids of no more than 54 minutes (Exeter Central typically 60 minutes), with potential further material journey time savings: significantly better than any bus journey time and competitive with variable and often unpredictable car journey times;
  - Train service frequency doubled from hourly to two trains per hour between Barnstaple and Exeter (three trains per hour for Crediton);
  - Very substantial increases in the numbers of passengers and revenue resulting from the combined effect of increasing frequency and reducing journey times;
  - Significantly improved punctuality and reliability for both Barnstaple and Okehampton train services, with reduced knock-on delay to other parts of the national network;
  - Reduced frequency and length of line closures due to bridge scour risks or track/other infrastructure damage following heavy rainfall with an ultimate goal of full route resilience to such events;
  - Train service capacity substantially increased, both for continuing growth on the Barnstaple-Exeter route and for any reinstatement of train services to Bideford;
  - Modern, faster accelerating, more reliable, higher capacity, more accessible, more comfortable, more environmentally-friendly trains replace diesel trains on the line;
  - Intermediate stations easier and safer to access and use by car/EV and active travel modes, including for disabled people; and
  - Stations and the train service brought into the digital age with wi-fi where not present, better mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route and digital ticketing.

This vision and outcomes are supported by the following illustrative improvement interventions, subject to further engineering, operational and economic review as the business case progresses. The improvement interventions are analysed in more detail in Annex A. The list is not all-or-nothing: elements could be chosen depending on funding available and priorities, including a potential phased implementation over time, with elements prioritised for earlier or later implementation on the basis of a combination of cost and funding availability.

While the stations/accessibility interventions are highly scalable, the same is much less true of the interventions needed to modernise the railway infrastructure. Many elements of the stations/accessibility interventions could be implemented separately and in smaller or larger numbers and still give benefits to users. In contrast, it is not feasible, for example, to introduce additional passing places to facilitate an increase in the frequency of the train service without also modernising the signalling system and in some cases having to rebuild a second platform at stations. Equally, improvements to maximum permitted line speeds or introducing new, faster accelerating trains would not reduce journey times unless additional train passing capability was introduced. The many years that have passed with relatively little work being done on the line means that meaningful modernisation outside the stations needs a large step change in the capability of the infrastructure with a concomitantly large price tag. However, further economic, engineering and operability studies would be needed before firm conclusions can be drawn on the minimum viable product.

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#### *Modernising the railway infrastructure*

- Raising line speeds at places where higher permitted maximum speeds could in practice be used to reduce journey times;
- Replacing all remaining sections of old jointed track with continuously welded rail;
- Creating a dynamic loop of around seven miles between Newton St Cyres and the former Coleford Junction by reinstating double track between Newton St Cyres and Crediton and installing new point work at the former Coleford Junction, thereby converting the parallel currently single lines from Crediton to Okehampton and Barnstaple into double track;
- Creating additional double track on the northern part of the route to allow trains to pass each other, subject to further engineering and operational study;
- Reinstating the second platform at Yeoford on the new double track section, where possible reusing old platform structures and avoiding lifts unless absolutely necessary;
- Modernising crossing control and signalling systems;
- Using modern monitoring technology to improve the resilience of the line's bridges to closures due to scour risks; and
- Changing station request stop status: removal of request stop status at more heavily used stations and station stop kiosks installed at less-used stations to reduce journey time-delaying speed reductions at those stations.

#### *Introducing modern trains*

- As part of separate, complementary scheme, replacing the diesel trains on the route with modern trains offering:
  - Shorter journey times through much higher acceleration;
  - Greater reliability;
  - Selective door opening to achieve greater capacity without costly platform lengthening;
  - More comfort for passengers;
  - Ideally level boarding for improved accessibility; and
  - Greater environmental friendliness, including lower noise levels.

#### *Improving the usability and accessibility of the stations*

- Improving selected station car parks to good modern standards;
- Enlarging existing station car parks at key stations;
- Installing electric vehicle chargers at all stations with formal car parks;
- Installing ticket machines at larger, higher use stations, and pay-as-you-go;
- Installing wi-fi at stations without it and improving mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route;
- Creating improved, safer access to intermediate stations for pedestrians and other users; and
- Improving road layouts at key level crossings for the safety of road and rail users.

#### **Strong post-pandemic growth – Devon a place for confidence in rail investment**

Given that Devon County Council has a successful record in promoting improvements to the rail network and given that train services in Devon and the South West continue to be well used and grow even after the COVID pandemic, with the Exeter-Barnstaple route in particular substantially above the best pre-pandemic passenger numbers, Torridge, North Devon and Mid Devon should be seen as places in which there should be confidence in investing in rail.

Within that wider context, this document concludes, at an early stage of business case development and through a cautious, sober assessment of the factors involved, that the aspiration for a full modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line and the train services using it is sufficiently realistic and is of sufficient potential to help address the material local socio-economic and transport-related issues to justify further work being undertaken.

This would involve decisions on who should sponsor business case work going forward and on whether to progress the development of a full Strategic Outline Business Case. Such work would enable engineering design to establish an envelope of likely costs, including to inform the development of a fuller economic appraisal. This is explored further in the Management Case.

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#### **The problems modernising the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route can help solve**

Very weak socio-economic conditions: Barnstaple, the North Devon, Torridge and Mid Devon districts register unusually poorly on a wide range of socio-economic indicators. The trend towards the centralisation and specialisation of services and facilities means that many people need to travel to Exeter and beyond for work, education, health care, leisure and other purposes, even with countervailing initiatives to maintain local self-containment.

The physical peripherality of Northern and Mid Devon inhibits the development of stronger areas of the local economy: The local economy has strengths in the growing sectors of defence, renewable energy, tourism and other fields. Key employers report that weaknesses in transport provision make it harder to recruit permanent staff. 'Hard-to-recruit' specialists such as sub-contractors from other parts of the country need to travel inwards to support these developing areas of the economy.

Slow journey times for all transport modes results in physical and social peripherality: The physical geography of the area between Barnstaple and Exeter creates physical and social peripherality in Northern and Mid Devon, which exacerbates the weak socio-economic conditions. This will continue without intervention. The rail route is geographically the most direct, but over-rationalisation of infrastructure in BR days results in inherent limitations in what it can offer, while the car and bus routes are longer and geographically indirect. Car journeys are long and slow and suffer from road congestion, in particular in Exeter and Barnstaple, and are not resilient to the effects of severe weather. Public transport is slower still, with the slow, infrequent through Barnstaple-Exeter bus services not operating on Sundays and taking an indirect route via Bideford/ Torrington. The intermediate railway stations have either no or in most cases infrequent bus services. The Exeter to Barnstaple rail route is slow for the distance involved (and is perceived by actual and current non-users as slow) and typical journey times are materially slower than the fastest in the timetable. Poor connectivity with longer-distance train services at Exeter St Davids deters the use of the route for longer-distance journeys, both for outbound and inbound travel such as tourism.

The current timetable is a compromise that satisfies nobody fully imposed by the infrastructure: Several intermediate stations, in particular Crediton, are growing fast in usage albeit from a lower base than Barnstaple, which sees the lion's share of passengers. It would therefore not be possible to omit many calls from the timetable, but these calls and the need to pass other trains because of the inherent limitations of the over-rationalised infrastructure mean a slow and irregular service. This, and poor connections in Exeter, suppress demand for longer-distance through rail journeys, which reduces rail revenue.

Poor rail punctuality and reliability adversely affects the wider rail network and deters passengers: The route suffers from passenger-detering poor punctuality and reliability and the inherent limitations of the long sections of single track with few passing places resulting from over-rationalisation in BR days exacerbate delays and mean they are difficult to recover from. The route exports delay to the rest of the national rail network. As well as the more regular disruption caused by late running and cancellations, the line is also affected on a less frequent but still regular basis by more extreme disruption caused by heavy rainfall swelling the River Taw and other waters crossed by the route leads to sudden precautionary route closures. These are implemented on the basis of an agreed operating procedure to reduce the risk of serious accidents resulting from damage to bridge supporting structures. Such closures sap the confidence of users and potential users, putting at risk the continuing strong growth in usage seen in recent years and limiting the wider social benefits the line brings to the area. While some alternative transport provision with taxis and buses has been possible in these circumstances, it is never a full substitute for the train service and has been accompanied by a 'do not travel' request from GWR.

Insufficient train capacity for busiest times now and future growth: The capacity of the longest trains is already insufficient for the busiest times when the route is seeing unprecedented growth in usage. Unlike most places in the country, usage of the Barnstaple route is outstripping the highest passenger pre-COVID usage figures, which were themselves at a record high. Current fleet problems mean that GWR sometimes runs shorter trains than diagrammed, exacerbating the crowding issues.

The stations are difficult to access and use: Most intermediate stations have limited parking and poor pedestrian access, for example direct onto unlit rural roads with no pavements. Barnstaple station car park has insufficient capacity to allow for significant further growth in usage. Several stations are inaccessible, or only partly accessible, to disabled people. Poor accessibility and usability of the stations constrains further growth in usage.

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The route has not entered the digital age: Mobile connectivity is poor along the route, resulting in poor on-train wi-fi limiting the use of the train journey for productive work purposes. Apart from Barnstaple, the stations do not have wi-fi and there is no pay-as-you-go ticketing.

The old diesel trains are environmentally unfriendly: The old diesel trains used are not environmentally friendly.

#### **The level of capital cost and project timescales are realistic aspirations for Devon**

At this early stage when no views have been taken on the extent of physical works needed to upgrade line frequency and improve journey times, which would be by far the most costly part of the overall scheme, no attempt has been made to develop a cost envelope. Instead, a wide range of locally-promoted rail schemes which have either recently been implemented or are currently in the course of construction or planning are noted in the Commercial and Financial Cases. This list of schemes show that it is realistic for a local authority under the right conditions to be able to sponsor substantial rail schemes.

The largest of these schemes in financial terms is the Northumberland Line reinstatement of train services on a freight-only route promoted by Northumberland County Council. This opened for train services in December 2024, with further stations opening in 2025 and 2026. The overall cost is cited by the promoter as £299 million.

#### **A vision for a programme of modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple line**

This document presents a vision for a programme of modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line that addresses these problems by transforming a 19<sup>th</sup> century asset into one fit for the challenges of today and the longer-term future and which would also provide a better basis for the separate, complementary schemes to increase the frequency of train services across central Exeter and to reinstate train services beyond Barnstaple to Bideford. While the complete package of improvements would provide the strongest outcomes, some individual elements could be undertaken separately if it did not prove possible to fund the entire package, or they could be implemented in sequence if funding was not all available at the same time.

The vision is purposely integrative, encompassing network infrastructure, stations and rolling stock, as all elements would benefit from modernisation. It intentionally looks to the longer term, not limiting itself to short-term 'quick-fixes'. While current rail organisational structures with separate funding lines for infrastructure and train operations/stations may make such an integrative approach more difficult, it is noted that the proposed new structures for the railway involving Great British Railways, which are expressly intended to bring the management of the infrastructure and train services back together ('vertical integration'), are designed to reduce the impact of such barriers.

#### **Objectives**

The following are proposed, aligning with and pursuing local, regional and national strategies:

- 1) Create transformational change to the Exeter to Barnstaple line by providing a platform for continued modernisation through future investment beyond the more limited 'patch and repair' of the past, in particular ensuring more punctual/reliable train services;
- 2) Provide additional capacity to the rail network between Exeter and Barnstaple to support and mitigate the impacts of current and expected future demand growth including where driven by increasing local population and planned housing expansion, also including if train services are extended to Bideford;
- 3) Improve socio-economic conditions in the Northern Devon and Mid Devon areas by reducing the negative impacts of peripherality, assisting in lifting productivity, prosperity and local economic growth;
- 4) Enable rail and more sustainable active and public transport modes to take an increased share of overall transport demand, itself growing as local population and housing increase, to contribute towards decarbonising transport on the Northern Devon - Exeter corridor;
- 5) Enhance access to employment opportunities, education and healthcare in Exeter and beyond for Northern Devon and Mid Devon residents, facilitate access to 'hard-to-recruit' jobs for people outside these areas, in particular by improving station usability for all passengers; and
- 6) Improve visitor access by sustainable public transport to the natural environment, including the Tarka Trail, the South West Coast Path, the Two Moors Way, the Exmoor National Park, the North Devon National Landscape, the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere and other coastal areas.

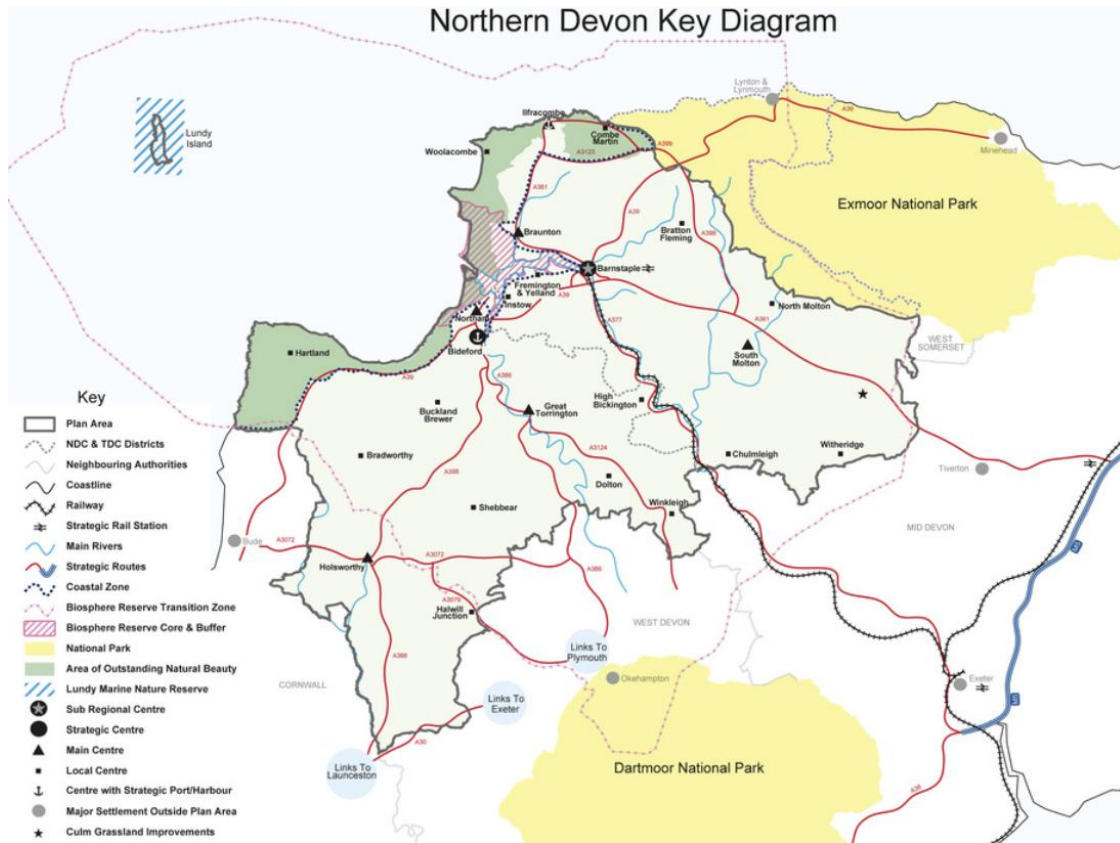
**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
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## Strategic Case

### Alignment with Local, District, County and Regional Strategies

#### Location

The following map from the *North Devon and Torridge Local Plan 2011-2031*<sup>14</sup> locates the Exeter to Barnstaple railway considered in this document within the wider geographical context:



The boundary between Mid Devon and North Devon districts is around half way between Eggesford and Kings Nympton stations. In line with local usage (e.g. *Northern Devon Tourism Strategy 2018 – 2022*), for brevity the North Devon and Torridge districts are jointly referred to as ‘Northern Devon’.

#### Torridge and North Devon District Councils

Both authorities have passed resolutions supportive of the agenda of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA), which includes modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line. Copies of the resolutions are contained in the leaflet publicising the inaugural meeting of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) in Annex D.

As planning authorities, Torridge and North Devon District Councils’ joint *North Devon and Torridge Local Plan 2011-2031* sets out where residential and other development is expected to take place. It explains that: “Development will continue to be focused at the Taw-Torridge estuary settlements of Barnstaple and Bideford with further growth planned for all Northern Devon towns”.

The Government has said that substantial increases in local housing will be needed in all parts of the country and that targets will be mandatory<sup>15</sup>: “In addition to restoring mandatory housing targets, the method used to calculate them, which relied on decade old data, will be updated. The new method will require councils to ensure homes are built in the right places and development is proportionate to the size of existing communities, while adding an extra level of ambition in the most unaffordable areas. The first port of call for

<sup>14</sup> <https://consult.torridge.gov.uk/kse/event/33615/section/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/housing-targets-increased-to-get-britain-building-again>

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development will be brownfield land. Reforms announced today will make explicit that the default answer to brownfield development should be “yes” and promote homebuilding at greater densities in urban centres, like towns and cities. To help deliver 1.5 million homes over the next five years, councils will have to review their green belt land if needed to meet their own target, identifying and prioritising ‘grey belt’ land, which the government has today set out a definition for. This includes land on the edge of existing settlements or roads, as well as old petrol stations and car parks.”

Torrige District Council has stated<sup>16</sup> that the new requirements will “mean there is now a need to deliver more than 1,300 new homes across North Devon and Torrige each year in order to meet the Government’s mandatory housing targets. This is a significant increase on the amount previously required and planned for delivery.” This statement emphasises the local challenges the new mandatory targets will bring.

#### *Mid Devon District Council*

Mid Devon District Council’s *Mid Devon Local Plan 2013-2033*<sup>17</sup> sets out where residential and other development is expected to take place. In relation to transport, it explains that the strategy is to: “reduce the need to travel by car, increasing the potential of public transport, cycling and walking.” While the primary focus of development is to be on Cullompton, “the market towns of Tiverton and Crediton will be the secondary focuses of new development.” Crediton is on the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line. Much of the recent development of housing in Crediton has been in the vicinity of the railway station and has helped shift the centre of gravity of the town in that direction, facilitating use of the railway.

#### *Devon County Council Strategic Plan*<sup>18</sup>

*Devon County Council’s Strategic Plan for 2021-2025* sets out the Council’s vision of Devon as “the best place to Grow Up, Live Well and Prosper”. The Plan says that it “focuses on how we will help the county to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, build on the resilience of local people and communities to create a fairer, healthier and more caring place, and grasp the opportunity to create a greener, more prosperous and inclusive future for all.”

The Plan sets out five challenges:

- “Climate Change: Climate change poses a serious threat to quality of life now and for the future generations”;
- “Devon’s Changing Population: Devon’s population is ageing and growing, with proportionately more older people when compared nationally”;
- “Fairness and Equality: COVID-19 has brought to wider consciousness inequalities within society, in areas from healthcare to technology”;
- “Trust and Confidence: Research during the pandemic shows that trust in local government and feelings of local unity have remained higher than at the national level, and local communities have become more important than ever”;
- “Financial Resilience and Prosperity: The pandemic has caused an economic decline not witnessed in the UK since the 1930s. Even before the pandemic, Devon was home to the District area with the lowest average wages in the UK<sup>19</sup>”.

The Plan’s priorities include Making Devon Greener by prioritising sustainable travel and transport. It will also support Economic Recovery and Growth and Helping Communities be Safe, Connected and Resilient by delivering infrastructure which will increase the range of travel choices and improving accessibility to jobs and services, tackling social isolation in rural parts of the County.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.torrige.gov.uk/article/22110/New-government-housing-requirements-impact-councils-housing-land-supply>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.middevon.gov.uk/media/350631/local-plan-review-final-adopted-version\\_accessible.pdf](https://www.middevon.gov.uk/media/350631/local-plan-review-final-adopted-version_accessible.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> *Best place - Devon County Council Plan 2021 – 2025*, Devon County Council, 2021: <https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/documents/s46163/Best%20Place%20Strategic%20Plan%202021-2025%20Progress%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> West Devon according to Office for National Statistics. ONS ASHE Table 8 shows a median weekly wage of £407.70 with a mean weekly wage of £466.50 for West Devon. Torrige: median £464.00/mean £466.50. Exeter: median £475.00/mean £545.60. Broadly, the median is a ‘typical’ wage, while the mean is a mathematical average. Larger upwards discrepancies between median and mean tend to show that there are more higher earners.

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#### *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan*

The *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>20</sup> (LTP) is the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority's statutory Local Transport Plan, setting out how the transport networks will meet the strategic priorities of both council areas covered and continue to serve the economy, the environment and society. It considers transport connectivity needs to other parts of Britain and abroad as well as transport needs in the Combined County Authority area. The 2025-2040 LTP was formally adopted in July 2025, replacing the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 3 2011-2026*<sup>21</sup>.

The 2025-2040 LTP comprises an overall Vision, with the analysis of needs and proposed solutions is contained in a 'place-based strategy' incorporating four areas sharing characteristics. A summary Action Plan concludes the document.

The place-based strategy groups are Exeter, Torbay, Growth Areas and Rural Devon & Market/ Coastal Towns. Barnstaple, together with Bideford and Northam, are included in the Growth Areas category as a single area. The Growth Areas are described as: "larger market towns that are identified in District Council Local Plans as areas for significant new economic and residential development. The levels of development will be large enough to support new transport, education and community facilities. These areas have maturing walking, wheeling and cycling networks and frequent public transport connections."

Within each place-based strategy, there is analysis against the six elements of the overall Vision:

- "*Decarbonisation* Reaching net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and a 50% reduction against 2010 levels by 2030, by reducing the need to travel, increasing digital access and shifting trips to sustainable transport and fuels."
- "*Reliability and resilience* Protecting and enhancing the reliability, resilience and safety of the local transport network and the strategic road and rail links that connect Devon and Torbay to the rest of the country."
- "*Easier travel* Increasing bus and rail patronage by providing well-integrated, inclusive and reliable transport options for residents and visitors in both rural and urban communities."
- "*Unlocking development* Supporting delivery of clean growth and regeneration by improving transport choices and use of technology to ensure new housing and employment developments are well connected."
- "*Greater places for people* Enhancing the attractiveness and safety of the built, natural and historic environment by improving air quality, public realm and reducing the number of people harmed on our roads." and
- "*The place to be naturally active* Enabling people to be more active with improved public health outcomes by expanding the multi-use trail network, delivering a network of quiet lanes and improving facilities and safety in urban areas."

The analysis in the Growth Areas section of the LTP puts considerable emphasis on the contribution transport improvements can make to the considerable housing challenges emerging in part as a result of the upwards revision of housing targets: "The following sections describe the scale of previously identified development in existing or emerging Local Plans; however, following the release of the Government's National Planning Policy Framework, there is potential for housing targets in these areas to be increased. The large level of development in these growth areas mean they will: 1) Support new education and community facilities within the development. 2) Increase demand for local services. 3) Require new transport infrastructure to provide access and unlock sites. 4) Require sustainable travel choices to ensure safe and suitable access and/or mitigate the impact of new development."

There are a number of key additions to the LTP for the purposes of this document compared to the *LTP 2011-2026*. The new LTP says: "Use of the North Devon Line from Barnstaple to Exeter has increased by 400% in the last 20 years, and many trains now leave Barnstaple full and with passengers standing. Working with the rail industry we will prioritise making the case for enhancing services on the North Devon Line to provide a half hourly frequency and journey times to Exeter of under an hour. This would provide fast, attractive and frequent

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>21</sup> *Local Transport Plan – Devon and Torbay Strategy 2011 – 2026*, Devon County Council and Torbay Council, April 2011: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-and-torbay-local-transport-plan-3-2011-2026/>

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services to Exeter, with greater capacity for communities along the line and connections to longer distance rail services”.

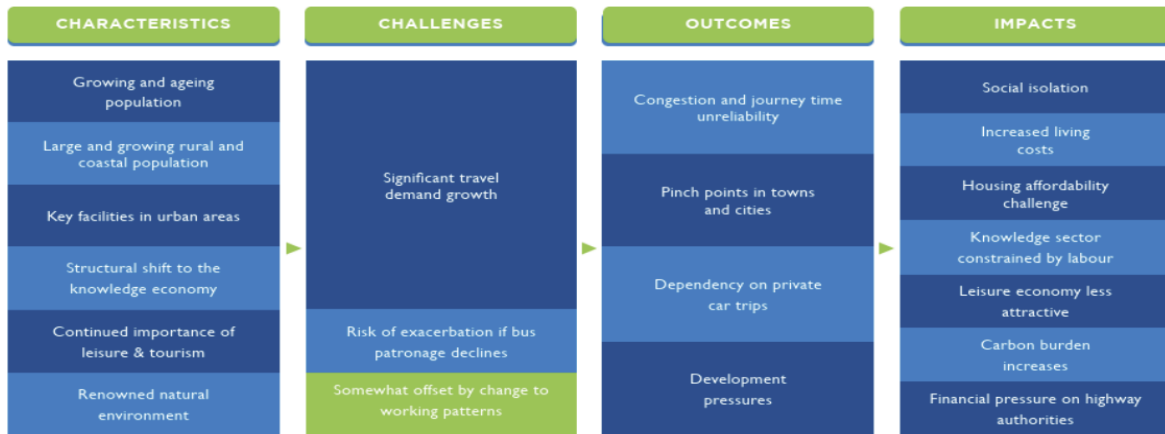
The new LTP also says: “We will make improvements at Barnstaple railway station. These will include access and forecourt changes to make it easier for people to change between bus and rail service” and makes specific references to the possibility of creating new intermodal hubs (‘Hub & Ride’) at rural rail stations, with Umberleigh on the Barnstaple line cited as an example. The LTP also sets out ambitions in relation to the introduction of EV charging at stations, improved mobile connectivity on trains, integrating rail and bus ticketing, better quality, more modern, more environmentally-friendly rolling stock and earlier/late trains than now.

There is also an aspiration for train services from Barnstaple to be extended to Digby & Sowton on the Exmouth line, which has developed into a substantial housing, employment and sports centre.

#### *Peninsula Transport Peninsula Rail Strategy*

Peninsula Transport, the Sub-National Transport Body (STB)<sup>22</sup> established in 2018 covering Cornwall, Devon, Plymouth, Somerset and Torbay, has published a strategy<sup>23</sup> outlining how “rail underpins the region’s future economic growth while helping to meet climate goals”.

The *Peninsula Rail Strategy* includes a table summarising the impacts of not investing in rail in the Peninsula given the characteristics of the area described in the report, the challenges it faces, the forecast outcomes arising from those characteristics and changes and the impacts that would result:



The *Peninsula Rail Strategy* includes the following map which shows the area covering Barnstaple, Fremington,



Yelland, Bideford, Northam, Appledore and Westward Ho! as constituting one of only five population clusters larger than 50,000 in the entire Peninsula.

The *Peninsula Rail Strategy* includes the following among a number of key challenges highlighted: “There are concerns that poor connectivity – such as the long journey times required to reach the more rural areas – is posing a barrier to growth and prosperity. This is paralleled by a desire to reduce deprivation, both in

<sup>22</sup> Described on Peninsula Transport’s website as: “Sub-national Transport Bodies were established as part of the Cities and Local Government Act 2016. Our role is to guide and advise government on our regional transport priorities and investment by producing and then maintaining a regional transport strategy. Our work is aimed at enhancing strategic cross-boundary connectivity and complements the work of our local authorities to enhance local connectivity.”

<sup>23</sup> *Peninsula Rail Strategy*, Peninsula Transport, July 2023. Peninsula Transport’s wider *Transport Strategy* includes direct references to the *Peninsula Rail Strategy*.

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the rural regions and in several urban ‘pockets’ that are relatively poorly served by public transport of any form, local or strategic.”

The *Peninsula Rail Strategy* highlights that Exeter is, compared to other larger centres in the region, unusually attractive as a destination by rail. It says: “At the time of the 2011 Census, 6.91% of trips into Exeter City Centre were made by rail, above the national average rail mode share of 3% and putting the city as the top in the region for rail usage as a means of travelling to work. ... the city enjoys excellent rail connectivity from all directions, serving as the confluence of two branch lines, the western terminus of the long-distance services from Waterloo and a key junction for long distance services through the region from London and the North East. This situation is likely to have improved since the 2011 Census, following service frequency enhancements on the line to Barnstaple and on the Great Western Mainline, as well as improved journey times for trains to London and the east of England.”

#### *Peninsula Transport Strategic Implementation Plan*

As well as a Strategy, each STB must also produce a *Strategic Implementation Plan* (SIP) “to provide guidance to ministers on the prioritisation and sequencing of strategic transport projects and schemes for the peninsula.”<sup>24</sup> The update paper says that a SIP is: “An Implementation plan document for the PT Strategy, which clearly sets out the regional priorities for the region and a strategic document providing advice to ministers for investment.” The aim is to ensure that schemes included in an SIP are genuinely of regional rather than solely local importance.

Peninsula Transport’s final SIP<sup>25</sup> published on 28 May 2025 includes the infrastructure upgrade/two trains per hour elements of the Barnstaple scheme. It also includes more general goals of improving station accessibility and expanding EV charging in rural areas without listing specific locations.

#### *Devon Climate Emergency Declaration*

The *Devon Climate Emergency Declaration*<sup>26</sup> was announced in 2019 by a consortium of public, private and voluntary organisations collaborating through a Devon Climate Emergency Response Group. Devon County Council, North Devon District Council and Torridge District Council are partners. The Declaration “sets out an ambition to tackle climate change that covers all of Devon”. The Declaration recognises “that carbon emissions must reduce globally by at least 45% by 2030 from 2010 levels and reach net-zero by 2050 if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change by keeping warming below 1.5 degrees”. The *Declaration* includes a direct reference to transport in a plan to be developed to address the climate challenge: “Travelling less and using improved walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure more often, and using electric and hydrogen vehicles”.

The accompanying *Devon Carbon Plan* explains how net zero carbon could be achieved in Devon by 2050. In relation to transport, it prioritises cycling, walking, shared and public transport. The *Devon Carbon Plan* includes a set of actions to achieve the net zero carbon goal. Action T21 says the partners will “work with government to improve strategic and branch line rail infrastructure and services, including reviewing the reopening of lines and increasing access to rail and integration with other modes of transport”.

#### **Alignment with National Policy**

##### *English Devolution*

The Government’s English devolution policy as set out in the 2024 White Paper<sup>27</sup> is in particular concerned with regional socio-economic development. The White Paper cites rail improvements sponsored locally by existing English authorities with devolved powers such as Transport for London and Liverpool as prime examples of the success of existing English devolution arrangements and that improved transport can be key to improving prosperity. The White Paper (section 3.3.) states: “High quality transport infrastructure supports growth and opportunity. Bringing decisions about transport closer to people is key to improving the transport

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<sup>24</sup><https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/documents/s48857/PTB%20240613%20Item%204%20Peninsula%20Transport%20SIP%20v.final.pdf> An STB board paper explaining SIPs and the proposed approach to developing one for Peninsula Transport.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.peninsulatransport.org.uk/news-articles/peninsula-transport-strategic-implementation-plan-2025-2050/>

<sup>26</sup> [devonclimateemergency.org.uk](https://devonclimateemergency.org.uk). The *Devon Carbon Plan* is included on the same website.

<sup>27</sup> *English Devolution White Paper – Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, 16 December 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

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networks we rely on every day. We will therefore empower Strategic Authorities to take greater oversight of their local transport networks”.

On rail specifically, the White Paper says that the new Great British Railways will be underpinned by: “A statutory role for Mayors in governing, managing, planning, and developing the rail network, to further embed collaboration and bring decision-making as close as possible to local communities.”.

Devolution depends on institutional changes beyond the scope of this document, including the abolition of district councils and the creation of larger strategic authorities emulating the mayoral combined authorities already found in some urban parts of the country. The White Paper anticipates that most devolution will be led by Mayoral Strategic Authorities. Devon County Council and Torbay Council have already made the first steps towards the creation of such a body through combining to create a non-mayoral Combined County Authority. At the date of this document, the final geographical extent of a Strategic Authority covering the Devon area remained unresolved.

The locally-sponsored rail modernisation scheme for the Exeter to Barnstaple line covered by this document is consistent with the direction of travel indicated in the White Paper.

#### *National Infrastructure Strategy*

The *UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy*<sup>28</sup> covers all types of infrastructure, including transport. It supports investment in improving transport infrastructure, citing in particular the economic benefits that can result (paragraph 3.4): “Better transport infrastructure boosts growth by reducing travel time for businesses, better matching workers’ skills to high quality jobs, increasing the economic density of the country, enabling firms to access a wider selection of potential suppliers and customers, and supporting trade.”

There is a particular emphasis on improving access to cities and larger towns (paragraph 3.15): “When towns and villages are well connected to more productive cities, this enables residents to access employment in the city and benefit from improved connectivity.” While the primary focus in this document is on Northern/Mid Devon, the emphasis on the needs of cities is consistent with the Exeter’s needs for better accessibility from its hinterland/journey to work area also discussed here.

The *Strategy* also covers the impacts of climate change on infrastructure, in particular the need for greater flood resilience: “To support a long-term vision for flood resilience, the government will also explore setting a long-term multi-decade target for flood risk management in line with prior recommendations made by the National Audit Office and National Infrastructure Commission.” This is important given that the route is adjacent to or traverses water courses throughout most of its length and has suffered from repeated closures associated with heavy rainfall and flooding. These issues are explored further later in this document.

#### *Climate Change: Net Zero*

In 2008, the UK set a legally-binding target to bring greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. The Government’s climate change strategy<sup>29</sup> confirms this aim. The *Strategy* was published in 2021, but has so far been retained by the new government elected in 2024. The strategy says that “domestic transport has the largest share of UK greenhouse gas emissions of any sector across the economy, at 23% in 2019. The majority (55%) of these emissions are from passenger cars.” The strategy also confirms that: “We will build extra capacity on our rail network ... ”

#### *Department for Transport: Reorganisation of Britain’s Railways*

The Department for Transport sets out the following three priorities on its website<sup>30</sup>:

- “Grow the economy by enhancing the transport network, on time and on budget;
- Improve transport users’ experience, ensuring that the network is safe, reliable, and inclusive;
- Reduce environmental impacts by tackling climate change and improving air quality by decarbonising transport.”

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<sup>28</sup> HM Treasury, 11 June 2025, *UK Infrastructure: A 10 Year Strategy*:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6853c5db99b009dcdcb73649/UK\\_Infrastructure\\_A\\_10\\_Year\\_Strategy\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6853c5db99b009dcdcb73649/UK_Infrastructure_A_10_Year_Strategy_Web_Accessible.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> *Net Zero Strategy: Build Back Greener*, UK Government, October 2021.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-transport/about>

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In *A railway fit for Britain's future*<sup>31</sup> published in February 2025, Rt Hon Heidi Alexander MP, Secretary of State for Transport, set out six objectives for the reorganisation of the railways associated with the nationalisation of the franchises and the creation of Great British Railways:

- **Reliable** – so that people can have confidence in their journey;
- **Affordable** – so that prices are kept, wherever possible, at a point that works for both passengers and taxpayers;
- **Efficient** – so that people know their journey will be as straightforward as possible, from booking to travel, and to provide better value for the travelling public and taxpayer alike;
- **Quality** – so that passengers have the service experience they have a right to expect;
- **Accessible** – so that our railways are available for everyone to use; and
- **Safe** – so that people do not worry about their safety on the railway and are not in fear of accidents or crime when travelling.”

The Railways Bill<sup>32</sup> providing for the proposed reorganisation of the railways was introduced into Parliament in November 2025. The Bill is largely structural in nature, providing the necessary legal framework for the creation of a vertically-integrated Great British Railways, a new funding structure and permanent national ownership of train operations. Much of how the railway will be managed in the future and its wider direction and strategy will depend on things developed outside of the legislation itself under powers given by it. The current rail organisational structures with separate funding lines for infrastructure and train operations/stations may make the integrative approach of the improvement vision outlined in this document more difficult. It is noted that the proposed new structures for the railway involving Great British Railways, which are expressly intended to bring the management of the infrastructure and train services back together (‘vertical integration’), are designed to reduce the impact of such barriers and could therefore facilitate schemes such as this one.

The modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line has a good fit both with the Department’s wider priorities and the rail-specific objectives. As explained in this document, modernisation of the route with more, faster, more reliable journeys would promote social mobility and help tackle regional inequality and would provide a new, more sustainable transport option.

*Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG): Local Outcomes Framework*

The MHCLG has published a *Local Outcomes Framework*<sup>33</sup> establishing “a shared focus on the outcomes most important for achieving our collective aims and ultimately to raise living standards across England. The outcomes in the framework represent many of the most important responsibilities of local government underlining the essential part local government plays in achieving national priorities.” The *Framework* sets out 16 Priority Outcomes, with the one covering Transport and Local Infrastructure expressed in terms of an ambition that: “Communities are better connected with healthier, safer, and greener transport that meets the needs of all users and drives growth.” The *Framework* says that: “The transport and local infrastructure priority outcome reflects the role local authorities play in shaping local transport networks that enable the delivery of national and local ambitions, such as driving economic growth and increasing connectivity and inclusion.”

The scheme discussed in this document has strong alignment with this Priority Outcome. The *Framework’s* emphasis on the role of local authorities in shaping local/regional transport ambitions and vision is consistent with the angle taken in the Management Case of this document.

#### Summary

Drawing these strands together, there is a strong strategic focus at district, county, combined authority, regional and national level on climate, improving transport infrastructure reliability/resilience to severe weather events, socio-economic and demographic challenges. Rail is identified, as part of a wider focus on public and active transport, as a key strategic enabler. Very significant spatial disparities are identified between different parts of the county of Devon, which also has several of the localities with the lowest wages in the UK.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67b30eb94a80c6718b55bdf6/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future-print.pdf>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/railways-bill>

<sup>33</sup> 9 February 2026: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-outcomes-framework/local-outcomes-framework#priority-outcomes>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

As part of a wider trend, larger towns and cities are growing in relative attractiveness compared to smaller towns and villages.

In county, combined authority, regional and national policies, investment in modernising and improving railway lines is endorsed strategically as a way of addressing such spatial disparities. This allows easier access to growing employment centres in larger urban areas such as Exeter, which are also growing in importance for other services and facilities such as health care, education, training, leisure and retail. Exeter is identified as a city in which rail plays a particularly important and growing role. There is a particular focus on increasing the share of total travel for active travel and public transport within the wider context of promotion of sustainability and tackling climate change.

At the date of this document, the Government was starting to make changes to the wider national policy environment, in particular dropping the 'levelling up' policy. It is not clear how emerging new national policies might affect this business case, but there is a good fit between this scheme to modernise the rail route between Exeter and Barnstaple and the new Department for Transport priorities and the wider thrust in support of a greater local role in enhancing the rail network under the English devolution White Paper.

#### The Case for Change

The Department for Transport's guidance requires the Strategic Case to determine the rationale for a transport intervention, in particular by setting out the problem that requires a solution, what can be done and what outcomes are expected to be achieved.

#### *The need for an intervention*

As explained above, the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>34</sup> says that the Combined County Authority will: "Use of the North Devon Line from Barnstaple to Exeter has increased by 400% in the last 20 years, and many trains now leave Barnstaple full and with passengers standing. Working with the rail industry we will prioritise making the case for enhancing services on the North Devon Line to provide a half hourly frequency and journey times to Exeter of under an hour. This would provide fast, attractive and frequent services to Exeter, with greater capacity for communities along the line and connections to longer distance rail services". The LTP also cites a number of other improvements to the line, including better integration with other transport modes. It cites a number of potential benefits that could ensue, but is less analytical than its predecessor LTP as to the underlying reasons supporting the options chosen.

The *Transport Strategy for the Market & Coastal Towns and Rural Areas* contained in the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 3*<sup>35</sup>, 2011-2026 provides a more analytical description of the challenges: "the trend towards the centralization and specialisation of services and facilities mean [sic] that these towns [which include Barnstaple]<sup>36</sup> cannot survive without effective and reliable transport links. Whilst many were still quite self-contained in terms of employment opportunities, it was recognised that increasingly the trend for employment growth would be in areas such as Barnstaple, Exeter, Newton Abbot, Plymouth and Torbay. The road, including bus travel, and rail links to these centres are critical and should therefore form the core of the strategy."

The *Strategic Outline Business Case*<sup>37</sup> for reopening the railway to Tavistock makes the same basic argument: "patterns of growth in the South-West Peninsula have seen a steady trend towards concentration of activity at major settlements such as Plymouth and Exeter, together with expansion around subregional towns linked to the economies of the larger major regional centres."

Alongside these patterns of spatial activity, there has been a growing view that the demand for travel cannot be accommodated by unconstrained car use, which creates congestion on the highway network and reinforces the social exclusion experienced by those without access to a car. Sustainable transport connectivity is required to meet a raft of national, regional and local policies.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>35</sup> *Local Transport Plan – Devon and Torbay Strategy 2011 – 2026*, Devon County Council and Torbay Council, April 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Market & Coastal Towns, the list of which in the *Strategy* includes Barnstaple, Bideford, Crediton, Great Torrington, Ilfracombe, Lynton/Lynmouth and Okehampton, all either directly served by the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line or connected to it by bus links.

<sup>37</sup> Devon County Council - *Tavistock-Plymouth Line Reopening Strategic Outline Business Case – Restoring Your Railway: RYR387*, 22 September 2022: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/outline-business-case-submitted-for-reopening-tavistock-to-plymouth-rail-line/>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

*What problems could modernising the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line help solve?*

Very weak socio-economic conditions: Barnstaple, the North Devon, Torrington and Mid Devon districts register unusually poorly on a wide range of socio-economic indicators. The trend towards the centralisation and specialisation of services and facilities means that many people need to travel to Exeter and beyond for work, education, health care, leisure and other purposes, even with countervailing initiatives to maintain local self-containment.

The physical peripherality of Northern and Mid Devon inhibits the development of stronger areas of the local economy: The local economy has strengths in the growing sectors of defence, renewable energy, tourism and other fields. Key employers report that weaknesses in transport provision make it harder to recruit permanent staff. 'Hard-to-recruit' specialists such as sub-contractors from other parts of the country need to travel inwards to support these developing areas of the economy.

Slow journey times for all transport modes results in physical and social peripherality: The physical geography of the area between Barnstaple and Exeter creates physical and social peripherality in Northern and Mid Devon, which exacerbates the weak socio-economic conditions. This will continue without intervention. The rail route is geographically the most direct, but over-rationalisation of infrastructure in BR days results in inherent limitations in what it can offer, while the car and bus routes are longer and geographically indirect. Car journeys are long and slow and suffer from road congestion, in particular in Exeter and Barnstaple, and are not resilient to the effects of severe weather. Public transport is slower still, with the slow, infrequent through Barnstaple-Exeter bus services not operating on Sundays and taking an indirect route via Bideford/ Torrington. The intermediate railway stations have either no or in most cases infrequent bus services. The Exeter to Barnstaple rail route is slow for the distance involved (and is perceived by actual and current non-users as slow) and typical journey times are materially slower than the fastest in the timetable. Poor connectivity with longer-distance train services at Exeter St Davids deters the use of the route for longer-distance journeys, both for outbound and inbound travel such as tourism.

The current timetable is a compromise that satisfies nobody fully imposed by the infrastructure: Several intermediate stations, in particular Crediton, are growing fast in usage albeit from a lower base than Barnstaple, which sees the lion's share of passengers. It would therefore not be possible to omit many calls from the timetable, but these calls and the need to pass other trains because of the inherent limitations of the over-rationalised infrastructure mean a slow and irregular service. This, and poor connections in Exeter, suppress demand for longer-distance through rail journeys, which reduces rail revenue.

Poor rail punctuality and reliability adversely affects the wider rail network and deters passengers: The route suffers from passenger-detering poor punctuality and reliability and the inherent limitations of the long sections of single track with few passing places resulting from over-rationalisation in BR days exacerbate delays and mean they are difficult to recover from. The route exports delay to the rest of the national rail network. As well as the more regular disruption caused by late running and cancellations, the line is also affected on a less frequent but still regular basis by more extreme disruption caused by heavy rainfall swelling the River Taw and other waters crossed by the route leads to sudden precautionary route closures. These are implemented on the basis of an agreed operating procedure to reduce the risk of serious accidents resulting from damage to bridge supporting structures. Such closures sap the confidence of users and potential users, putting at risk the continuing strong growth in usage seen in recent years and limiting the wider social benefits the line brings to the area. While some alternative transport provision with taxis and buses has been possible in these circumstances, it is never a full substitute for the train service and has been accompanied by a 'do not travel' request from GWR.

Insufficient train capacity for busiest times now and future growth: The capacity of the longest trains is already insufficient for the busiest times when the route is seeing unprecedented growth in usage. Unlike most places in the country, usage of the Barnstaple route is outstripping the highest passenger pre-COVID usage figures, which were themselves at a record high. Current fleet problems mean that GWR sometimes runs shorter trains than diagrammed, exacerbating the crowding issues.

The stations are difficult to access and use: Most intermediate stations have limited parking and poor pedestrian access, for example direct onto unlit rural roads with no pavements. Barnstaple station car park has insufficient capacity to allow for significant further growth in usage. Several stations are inaccessible, or only partly accessible, to disabled people. Poor accessibility and usability of the stations constrains further growth in usage.

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

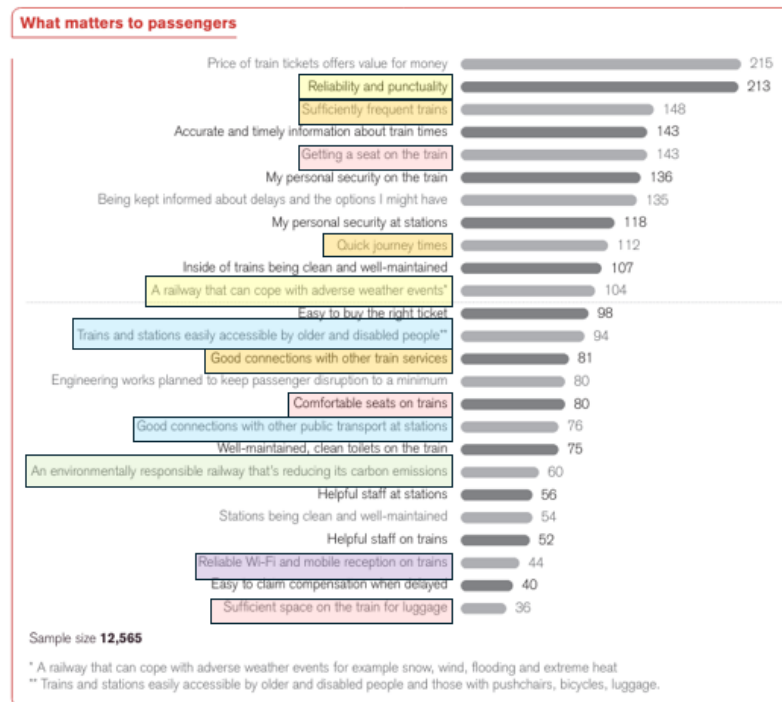
The route has not entered the digital age: Mobile connectivity is poor along the route, resulting in poor on-train wi-fi limiting the use of the train journey for productive work purposes. Apart from Barnstaple, the stations do not have wi-fi and there is no pay-as-you-go ticketing.

The old diesel trains are environmentally unfriendly: The old diesel trains used are not environmentally friendly.

This bundle of related issues is often encapsulated in the word ‘peripherality’. Devon County Council has concluded that coastal and market towns including Barnstaple “cannot survive without effective and reliable transport links”. Current transport provision is not a suitable basis for sustainable future development, including for the important tourism sector.

The Government’s official rail passenger watchdog, Transport Focus, published its most recent research into rail passenger priorities in December 2022<sup>38</sup>. The graphic from that report on the following page has been annotated below to show how the top 25 passenger priorities relate to the problems with the Exeter to Barnstaple route that a modernisation programme could address.

The graphic immediately shows the scale of the issues and the extent to which the route fails to meet passenger expectations. A key issue which this chart cannot show is the extent to which these points deter non-users from using trains on this corridor.



The extent to which word of mouth and local/social media report on crowded, delayed trains and car users see small improvised car parks with no or little free space, the absence of wi-fi at most stations and limited mobile connectivity on trains or at stations would suggest that there is likely to be a significant deterrent effect.

It should also be noted that the research findings represent views of rail in the country as a whole. The apparently lower importance rating given to factors such as ‘quick journey time’ or digital connectivity therefore needs to be treated with some caution, as many rail routes elsewhere in the country do not suffer from such poor journey times relative to other modes or may have better digital connectivity compared to the experience on the Barnstaple route.

- Punctuality - reliability
- Frequency – journey times
- Capacity - comfort
- Accessibility
- Environmental
- Digital: wi-fi, mobile connectivity

### SMART Objectives

To address these points, sustainable transport connectivity on the Northern Devon to Exeter corridor needs to be improved. The following objectives are proposed. The objectives have been drafted with a view to ensuring realisation of key elements of the local and regional strategies.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/britains-railway-what-matters-to-passengers/>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

There are similarities with the Tavistock branch reinstatement scheme objectives<sup>39</sup>. The adoption of similar objectives is more a measure of alignment with and pursuit of the wider themes and issues identified by Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority, Devon County Council, Peninsula Transport and the UK government and the strategic ambitions deriving from them than from a claim that these rail schemes are close at a detailed level.

Equally, there is strong congruence with the objectives of the train service reinstatement scheme implemented on the Northumberland Line between Newcastle and Ashington<sup>40 41</sup>. Given the number of 'golden threads' linking the national strategies on levelling up, net zero and transport more generally with the regional and local strategies, it would be odd if there was not a strong degree of congruence in objectives between schemes across the country, even taking account of the clear differences that do exist.

While the Northumberland Line scheme is usually branded a 'rail reopening' and its key output is indeed the reinstatement of passenger train services on the route involved, many of the activities undertaken have strong similarities with the Barnstaple line modernisation scheme. The Northumberland Line scheme aims to create a modern passenger route from a line previously carrying only a limited number of freight trains that had seen little investment. The Barnstaple line modernisation scheme aims to create a fully modern passenger route from one that had largely been bypassed as modernisation happened to other railway lines.

#### Objective 1)

Create transformational change to the Exeter to Barnstaple line by providing a platform for continued modernisation through future investment beyond the more limited 'patch and repair' of the past, in particular ensuring more punctual/reliable train services:

- **Specific:** Deliver a measurably and observably better rail transport service.
- **Measurable:** Statistics are available on rail punctuality and reliability.
- **Achievable:** A train service allowing more reliable accessibility to employment opportunities, a wider workforce and improved connectivity with the rest of the country.
- **Realistic:** The objective realises key elements of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and Peninsula Transport strategies against a backdrop of strongly growing rail usage on the Barnstaple line and the South West more generally, even post-pandemic.
- **Time bound:** A monitoring and evaluation plan will be developed as outlined in the Management Case.

#### Objective 2)

Provide additional capacity to the rail network between Exeter and Barnstaple to support and mitigate the impacts of current and expected future demand growth including where driven by increasing local population and planned housing expansion, also including if train services are extended to Bideford:

- **Specific:** Longer, more frequent train services on the Exeter-Barnstaple railway line.
- **Measurable:** Statistics are available on modal share and train plan delivery.
- **Achievable:** Needs investment in the rail scheme.
- **Realistic:** The objective realises key elements of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and Peninsula Transport strategies against a backdrop of strongly growing rail usage on the Barnstaple line and the South West more generally, even post-pandemic.
- **Time bound:** A monitoring and evaluation plan will be developed as outlined in the Management Case.

#### Objective 3)

Improve socio-economic conditions in the Northern Devon and Mid Devon areas by reducing the negative impacts of peripherality, assisting in lifting productivity, prosperity and local economic growth:

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<sup>39</sup> Devon County Council - *Tavistock-Plymouth Line Reopening Strategic Outline Business Case – Restoring Your Railway: RYR387*, 22 September 2022: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/outline-business-case-submitted-for-reopening-tavistock-to-plymouth-rail-line/>

<sup>40</sup> "1): Facilitate economic activity, employment growth and the delivery of housing sites within South East Northumberland and the wider region. 2): Create mode shift from car to public transport to improve local air quality and reduce highway congestion at key bottlenecks on the highway network between South East Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle. 3): Improve public transport accessibility for commuting, retail and leisure trips between South East Northumberland, North Tyneside and Newcastle."

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Studies%20and%20Evidence%20Reports/Infrastructure%20Studies/Northumberland-Line-Strategic-Outline-Business-Case-March-2019.pdf>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

- **Specific:** Deliver a better transport service that puts Barnstaple and other stations on the route more firmly on the British national rail map.
- **Measurable:** Statistics are available on business and numbers of jobs in the area, together with average wages and economic growth.
- **Achievable:** A train service allowing better accessibility to employment opportunities, a wider workforce and improved connectivity with the rest of the country with shorter journey times.
- **Realistic:** The objective realises key elements of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and Peninsula Transport strategies against a backdrop of strongly growing rail usage on the Barnstaple line and the South West more generally, even post-pandemic.
- **Time bound:** A monitoring and evaluation plan will be developed as outlined in the Management Case.

#### Objective 4)

Enable rail and more sustainable active and public transport modes to take an increased share of overall transport demand, itself growing as local population and housing increase, to contribute towards decarbonising transport on the Northern Devon - Exeter corridor:

- **Specific:** This reflects the currently poor rail journey times compared to car-based journeys and insufficient capacity to meet current and future demand given levels of usage growth.
- **Measurable:** Statistics on modal share for active and public transport are available.
- **Achievable:** Requires investment in the rail scheme. The level and structure of train service provision should be sufficient to encourage modal switch to rail.
- **Realistic:** The objective realises key elements of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and Peninsula Transport strategies against a backdrop of strongly growing rail usage on the Barnstaple line and the South West more generally, even post-pandemic.
- **Time bound:** A monitoring and evaluation plan will be developed as outlined in the Management Case.

#### Objective 5)

Enhance access to employment opportunities, education and healthcare in Exeter and beyond for Northern Devon and Mid Devon residents, facilitate access to 'hard-to-recruit' jobs for people outside these areas, in particular by improving station usability for all passengers:

- **Specific:** This reflects the currently poor rail journey times and low frequency.
- **Measurable:** Statistics on modal share for active and public transport are available.
- **Achievable:** A train service allowing better accessibility to employment, education and healthcare in Exeter with shorter journey times.
- **Realistic:** The objective realises key elements of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and Peninsula Transport strategies against a backdrop of strongly growing rail usage on the Barnstaple line and the South West more generally, even post-pandemic.
- **Time bound:** A monitoring and evaluation plan will be developed as outlined in the Management Case.

#### Objective 6)

Improve visitor access by sustainable public transport to the natural environment, including the Tarka Trail, the South West Coast Path, the Two Moors Way, the Exmoor National Park, the North Devon National Landscape, the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere and other coastal areas:

- **Specific:** This reflects the current dominant focus on Barnstaple as a key access point by public transport to the Tarka Trail and other visitor attractions.
- **Measurable:** Survey techniques could be used. Statistics about overnight stays and visitor spend are available.
- **Achievable:** Requires investment in the rail modernisation scheme. The level of train service provision should be sufficient to encourage modal switch to rail.
- **Realistic:** The objective realises key elements of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority and Peninsula Transport strategies against a backdrop of strongly growing rail usage on the Barnstaple line and the South West more generally, even post-pandemic.
- **Time bound:** A monitoring and evaluation plan will be developed as outlined in the Management Case.

By way of prior word to the following analyses, this document recognises that transport improvements such as modernised train services are fundamentally enablers to wider change: they are necessary but not sufficient on

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

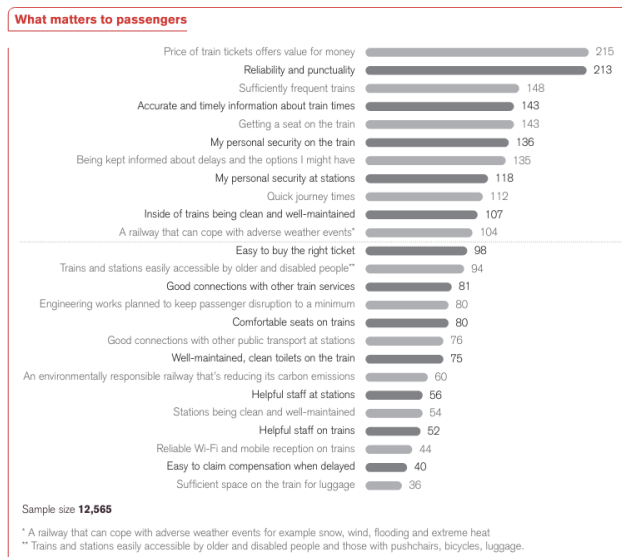
their own. They cannot be expected to solve wider socio-economic and other issues in isolation. The Department for Transport’s guidance<sup>42</sup> makes this clear: “Whilst it is clear that transport plays a significant role in the economy, transport interventions are unlikely to deliver transformational change in isolation.”

HM Treasury defines<sup>43</sup> ‘transformational change’ as “a persisting fundamental structural change that is virtually irreversible” and adds that “planned achievement of a transformation usually requires multiple changes across many fronts organised through strategic portfolios”.

*Objective 1) Create transformational change to the Exeter to Barnstaple line by providing a platform for continued modernisation through future investment beyond the more limited ‘patch and repair’ of the past, in particular ensuring more punctual/reliable train services; and*

*Objective 2) Provide additional capacity to the rail network between Exeter and Barnstaple to support and mitigate the impacts of current and expected future demand growth including where driven by increasing local population and planned housing expansion, also including if train services are extended to Bideford*

Punctuality and reliability are key parameters in passenger satisfaction and therefore key priorities for improvement. ‘Punctuality’ rates whether trains run on time compared to the published timetable and ‘reliability’ rates whether trains are cancelled, either in full or for part of their journey. Effectively, cancelled or late trains belie the promise in the timetable to transport passengers to their desired destination at a particular time.



The Government’s official rail passenger watchdog, Transport Focus, published its most recent research into rail passenger priorities in December 2022<sup>44</sup>. The adjacent chart from the Transport Focus report shows how punctuality and reliability are key factors for passengers, with only the price/value for money of ticket prices being at a similar level of importance.

GWR says that it places a strong focus on improving the punctuality and reliability of its train services, as shown by it being one of its four key priority areas for action over the five years from 2023, as published in its *Annual Customer and Stakeholder Report 2022-23*<sup>45</sup>.

Network Rail also identifies operational performance in its *Wales and Western CP7 Strategic Business Plan*<sup>46</sup> as being central to what

passengers and other stakeholders want from the railway: “The key message from most stakeholders and passengers was that Network Rail should focus on the fundamentals. The Covid-19 pandemic, changes in working patterns and the rise of sustainability in public consciousness have not fundamentally altered the key performance indicators of the rail network in Wales & Western. Punctuality, reliability and capacity still dominate passenger assessments of what makes for a good service. For this reason, maintaining a good level of service punctuality was rated as one of our stakeholders’ highest priorities.”

However, the Barnstaple to Exeter railway line suffers from performance problems compared to other routes in the South West, as the following graphics show (author: source ORR<sup>47</sup>):

<sup>42</sup> Department for Transport, *Transport Business Cases: The Levelling Up Toolkit*, February 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Green Book Event – Levelling Up Review: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6038e8c2d3bf7f03919ad281/Green\\_Book\\_Event-levelling\\_up\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6038e8c2d3bf7f03919ad281/Green_Book_Event-levelling_up_review.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/britains-railway-what-matters-to-passengers/>

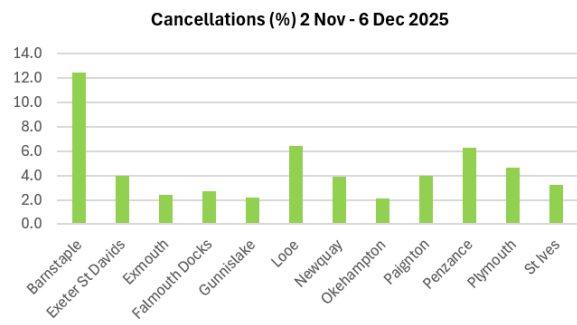
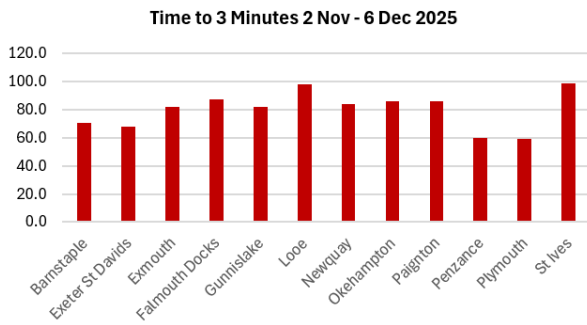
<sup>45</sup> <https://www.gwr.com/about-gwr/our-business/partners-and-stakeholders>

<sup>46</sup> <https://sacuksprodnr.digital0001.blob.core.windows.net/strategic-business-plan/Region%20strategic%20business%20plans/Wales%20and%20Western%20CP7%20Strategic%20Business%20Plan.pdf>

<sup>47</sup> <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/performance/performance-at-stations>

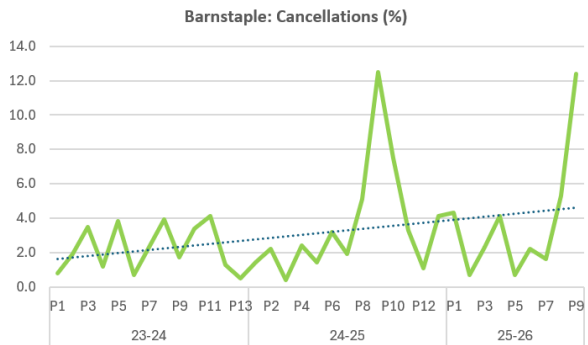
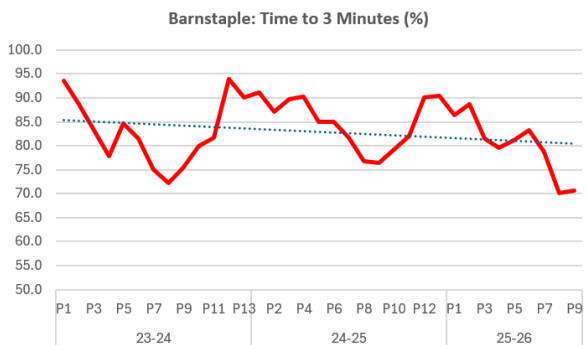
# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

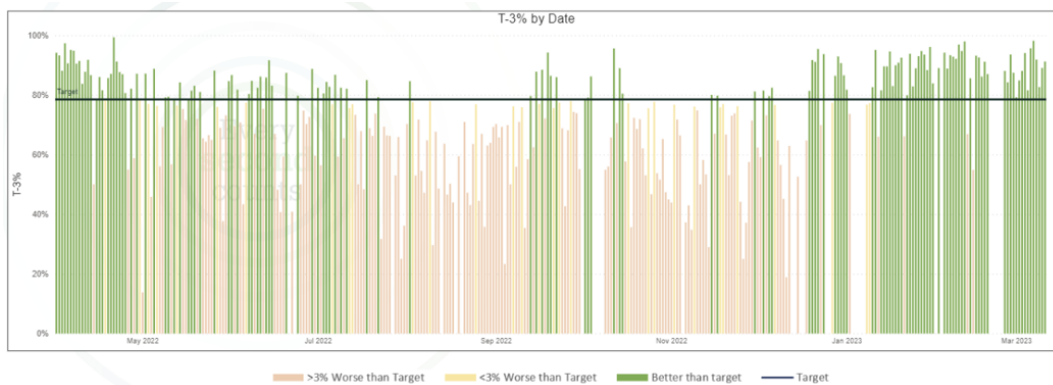


The punctuality of train services on the Barnstaple line is closer to the poorer levels seen at stations such as Exeter St Davids, Plymouth and Penzance with large numbers of long-distance services. In contrast, the self-contained branches tend to see better performance<sup>48</sup>. The 4-weekly period shown captures the effects of the cancellations caused by precautionary closure of the route for bridge scour following heavy rain and other severe weather impacts. It is striking how different the Barnstaple and Okehampton routes are, in spite of the fact that they share track between Exeter Central and Crediton. This suggests that the operation inflexibility of the Eggesford passing place and the tight turn-round times at Barnstaple station, both factors off the route section of route shared with the Okehampton services, are of particular importance in determining the poor performance of Barnstaple services.

The following charts (also author from the same ORR statistics) show how punctuality and reliability as measured at Barnstaple have evolved since the current ORR performance statistical data series started in April 2023 ('P' = Period: there are 13 4-weekly Periods in each year, starting in March):



Both punctuality and reliability show noticeably worsening trends. In the case of reliability, that is driven in particular by increasing severe weather events. While it is clear from the earlier charts that the Barnstaple line is generally poorer in performance terms compared to other routes in the South West, these charts also show how variable performance is. Punctuality shows clear regular seasonal variability, with spring an early summer best, deteriorating in the autumn and winter. Performance variability also exists at a much lower level, varying substantially from day to day, as shown by the following historic graphic (GWR):

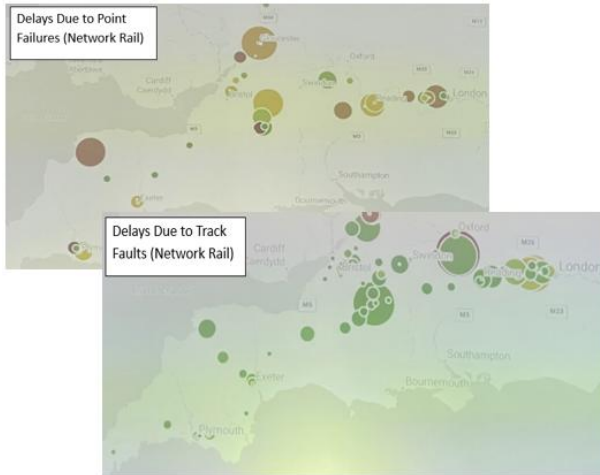


<sup>48</sup> The Looe line, having been built in a former canal, is particularly prone to winter flooding.

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

The overall generally poor levels performance and seasonal/daily variability are well known to regular travellers and have been regularly reported in various public media, acting as a deterrent to potential users of the route.



The Barnstaple line exports delays it suffers to the other train service groups. The adjacent graphics (images: Network Rail 2024) show how significant the Barnstaple line is in the export of delays caused by infrastructure failures alone, both within the South West and in many cases a considerable distance from the Barnstaple route itself.

Several features of the train services operating on the line mean that they are less resilient and recover less easily from delays than other routes:

- The train services also operate on the busy corridor between Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central stations shared with the frequent train services on the GWR-operated Exmouth to Paignton route via Exeter (including irregular extensions from Barnstaple) and the SWR-operated Exeter to London Waterloo route;
- The train services share tracks and platforms at Exeter St Davids station not only with the two routes mentioned above, but also with GWR-operated London Paddington to Plymouth/Cornwall long-distance services, GWR-operated South Wales/Bristol/Taunton to Plymouth/Cornwall services, CrossCountry services between the North of England and the South West (all of which as seen above tend to have poorer levels of performance), some freight trains and other types of trains such as passenger charter trains and infrastructure maintenance trains;
- Around a mile to the east of Exeter St Davids station at Cowley Bridge Junction all Barnstaple and Okehampton line services diverge from the main line to/from London/Bristol on a flat junction, resulting in interactions with longer-distance main line services;
- On the 39% route to Barnstaple, there are only two passing places at Crediton and Eggesford. Neither is a 'dynamic loop' on which trains can pass each other while travelling at line speed over a considerable distance. Instead, all passing moves must be made in the stations themselves, which means that punctual trains can become delayed waiting for delayed ones and already delayed trains can pick up more delay while waiting for other delayed trains; and
- Turn-round times at Barnstaple are in most cases tight or very tight. That means that there is less scope for a delayed train to return to punctual running on the return trip back from Barnstaple and trains arriving punctually can be delayed by passengers disembarking and boarding, including with bikes, luggage and wheelchairs.

The first three factors are inherent to the structure of train services in the wider Exeter area and could not be addressed by a scheme focusing on the Barnstaple railway line, but do mean that in practice the route needs greater performance resilience to address delay imported from elsewhere on the network. The last two could be addressed by changes to the Exeter to Barnstaple route itself. The limited train passing opportunities and the tight turn-round times at Barnstaple interact with each other to create a vicious circle of self-reinforcing poor performance. If that can be addressed, the train service interactions listed in the first three points would result in fewer exported delays to the wider national network. As mentioned above, the better performance of the Okehampton route in spite of sharing track between Exeter and Crediton emphasises the importance of the Eggesford passing place and tight Barnstaple turn-round times for the poor performance of the route.

The factors discussed here mean that in the event of severe delays or cancellations on the route, the control centre has few options available to it to bring the service back to acceptable operational conditions. Selective cancellations ('service recovery') lead to large gaps in the service, in particular at stations with less than hourly services.

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Turn-Round Times at Barnstaple (GWR December 2025 Timetable)									
Monday – Friday									
* Fridays-only late service omitted									
Arrive	0619	0717	0825	0928	1029	1125	1225	1329	1427
Depart	0625	0722	0835	0935	1035	1135	1235	1335	1435
Turn-Round	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>
Arrive	1525	1626	1728	1835	1931	2032	2133	2237	*
Depart	1535	1631	1733	1838	1942	2041	2141	2241	*
Turn-Round	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>*</b>
Saturday									
Arrive	0628	0723	0830	0931	1027	1126	1226	1327	1429
Depart	0631	0726	0834	0935	1035	1135	1232	1335	1435
Turn-Round	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>
Arrive	1526	1626	1732	1839	1938	2034	2133	2235	
Depart	1535	1639	1736	1843	1942	2040	2140	2240	
Turn-Round	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	
Sunday									
Arrive	0932	1033	1128	1229	1331	1426	1527	1624	1732
Depart	0936	1038	1133	1236	1336	1431	1532	1630	1737
Turn-Round	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>
Arrive	1827	1927	2026	2131					
Depart	1832	1936	2036	2136					
Turn-Round	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>					

The adjacent table (author) shows arrival and departure times from Barnstaple station and the resulting turn-round times (shown in bold in minutes) taken from the GWR December 2025 timetable in Annex B.

The shorter turn-round times typically correspond to the busiest times of the day when trains make additional calls at the smaller stations on the northern part of the route and when passenger numbers boarding or alighting are at their highest, in other words when there are increased performance risks.

The average turn-round on weekdays is 7 minutes and 6 minutes on both Saturdays and Sundays. However, that average is skewed upwards by a few longer turn-round times, with median/typical turn-round times being shorter.

Turn-rounds of only 3 or 4 minutes in particular are very tight. The driver needs to change ends and reorientate the train, ensuring for example that the correct passenger information for the direction being travelled is displayed. There is a very high risk of the train departing late even if it arrives on time if, for example, a train service is particularly busy or a passenger using a wheelchair needs to board or alight. With usage of the route continuing to grow strongly and Barnstaple forming a large part of overall usage, the performance impact of these tight turn-round times is only likely to worsen.

Even if no wider investment scheme were implemented to add or upgrade passing places, every additional minute that could be found from quicker journey times between Eggesford and Barnstaple would have a doubly beneficial effect:

- Each minute saved per direction would result in a two minute Barnstaple turn-round time improvement, both reducing the number of trains arriving and departing late and reducing the delay on those that did arrive or depart late; and
- Every train from Exeter could arrive one minute earlier at Barnstaple and depart one minute later, creating a journey time saving that would result in improved revenue for the route.

Reports from passengers and also from GWR via its train crew suggest that delays to passengers disembarking and boarding are not only experienced at the largest station at Barnstaple, but also at intermediate stations. Nearly all of these are request stops<sup>49</sup>. The basic idea of a request stop is to recognise that at the very smallest stations, not all trains will have passengers wanting to alight or board. Request stop status allows the train not to pass through the station at low speed if no request to stop has been made to the conductor on board or by a passenger on the platform.

Network Rail's *Timetable Planning Rules* covering the Western & Wales Route<sup>50</sup> allow a shorter than normal station dwell time of 30 seconds to be put into the working timetable for the request stops<sup>51</sup>. However, when most or all trains do in fact stop at request stop stations, the sub-standard dwell time assumption translates into additional delay, in particular where there are numerous request stops. Equally, where no passenger actually wants to alight or board, the need to slow on approach to a request stop station wastes time and increases fuel consumption. If a train is already delayed, each unnecessary slowing down wastes potential recovery.

Some stations such as Chapelton and Portsmouth Arms do continue to see very few passengers. However, the author's observation and reports from regular users suggest that at some of the request stations stops

<sup>49</sup> Newton St Cyres, Yeoford, Lapford, Kings Nympton, Portsmouth Arms, Umlerleigh, Chapelton. Only Crediton, Copplestone and Eggesford are not request stops.

<sup>50</sup> <https://sacupsprodnr.digital0001.blob.core.windows.net/operational-rules/Operational%20Rules/TPR/TPR%202024/V4/TPR%202024%20V4%20WWW.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> It is understood from GWR that this is not in fact done for all the request stops.

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are becoming the norm. With usage continuing to grow strongly, this is only likely to increase. Elsewhere on the network GWR has removed request stop status where increasing passenger usage has resulted in most trains stopping and where the request stop status affects performance<sup>52</sup>.

The Barnstaple to Exeter line is also affected on a less frequent but still regular basis by more extreme disruption caused by heavy rainfall swelling the River Taw and other waters crossed by the route leading to sudden precautionary route closures. These are implemented on the basis of an agreed operating procedure to reduce the risk of serious accidents resulting from damage to bridge supporting structures. In some cases, damage to track and infrastructure by flood waters has also caused closures.

The background to this approach is the Glanrhyd Bridge accident on 19 October 1987 on the Mid Wales line between Llandeilo and Llandovery. The first train of the day, travelling at low speed to inspect the route following reports of flooding, fell into the River Towy from a partially collapsed bridge. Three passengers and the train driver were killed. The collapse of a former railway bridge converted for active travel over the River Spey in Scotland on 14 December 2025, with scour later confirmed as the likely cause, shows the very real continuing risks to historic bridges from scour. In that case, nobody was hurt.

Wikipedia<sup>53</sup> explains: “The primary cause of the collapse was found to be scour at the downstream end of one of the bridge piers, causing a hole into which the pier eventually fell. A result of the incident was that the procedures for checking railway bridges were tightened. ... An inquest was held in July 1988, at which the jury returned a verdict of “Unlawful Killing” on all four of the victims.” Wikipedia<sup>54</sup> also says that: “Bridge scour is the removal of sediment such as sand and gravel from around bridge abutments or piers. Hydrodynamic scour, caused by fast flowing water, can carve out scour holes, compromising the integrity of a structure.”

Risk mitigation for the Barnstaple to Exeter line currently relies on water-level triggers and reactive inspection. This approach:

- Requires full line closure even when it is later clear that structures remain safe;
- Delays line reopening pending costly diver inspection, which is usually only possible once water levels and speeds have declined;
- Does not capture real-time scour, bed movement or flow velocity; and
- Does not provide predictive intelligence for Control.

This reactive approach is no longer sufficient for a climate-vulnerable line with the substantial wider socio-economic importance explained elsewhere in this document. Moreover, Network Rail’s *Weather Resilience and Climate Change Adaptation Plan CP7*<sup>55</sup> analysis shows that wetter winters and higher peak flows are now probable annual events, not rare shocks. The proportion of flood-exposed railway could increase from 37% to 54% nationally by mid-century. The North Devon Line’s proximity to multiple floodplains places it at disproportionately high risk. While ensuring that safety is fully maintained, a more active approach to management of the risks could reduce the impact on train services of sudden closures. Ultimately, a goal of eliminating closures through re-engineering of relevant structures could be set.

The disruption caused by such closures is increased by the fact that, while some alternative transport provision with taxis and buses has been possible in these circumstances, it is never a full substitute for the train service and has been accompanied by a ‘do not travel’ request from GWR. In particular, there is usually a substantial delay until replacement bus capacity is available, there are rarely enough buses available at short notice to provide the full capacity of the train service, the buses typically take at least 20 minutes longer than the train between Barnstaple and Exeter and intermediate stations are difficult to serve, with Yeoford and Newton St Cyres in particular not served. Furthermore, emergency divers, reactive inspections, unplanned temporary speed restrictions, repairs to infrastructure, bus/taxi hire and compensation to passengers for delayed and cancelled journeys all cost the rail industry money. Revenue is lost as a result of passengers deciding not to travel and unused tickets being refunded.

While scour-related closures are more frequent, severe weather can also cause disruption by damaging the track. For example, at on 27 January 2026 both the Barnstaple and Okehampton train services were suspended

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<sup>52</sup> For example, at Avoncliff on the Bath Spa to Westbury route.

<sup>53</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glanrhyd\\_Bridge\\_collapse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glanrhyd_Bridge_collapse)

<sup>54</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridge\\_scour](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bridge_scour)

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CP7-WRCCA-Plans-combined-summary-of-all-regions-April-2024.pdf>

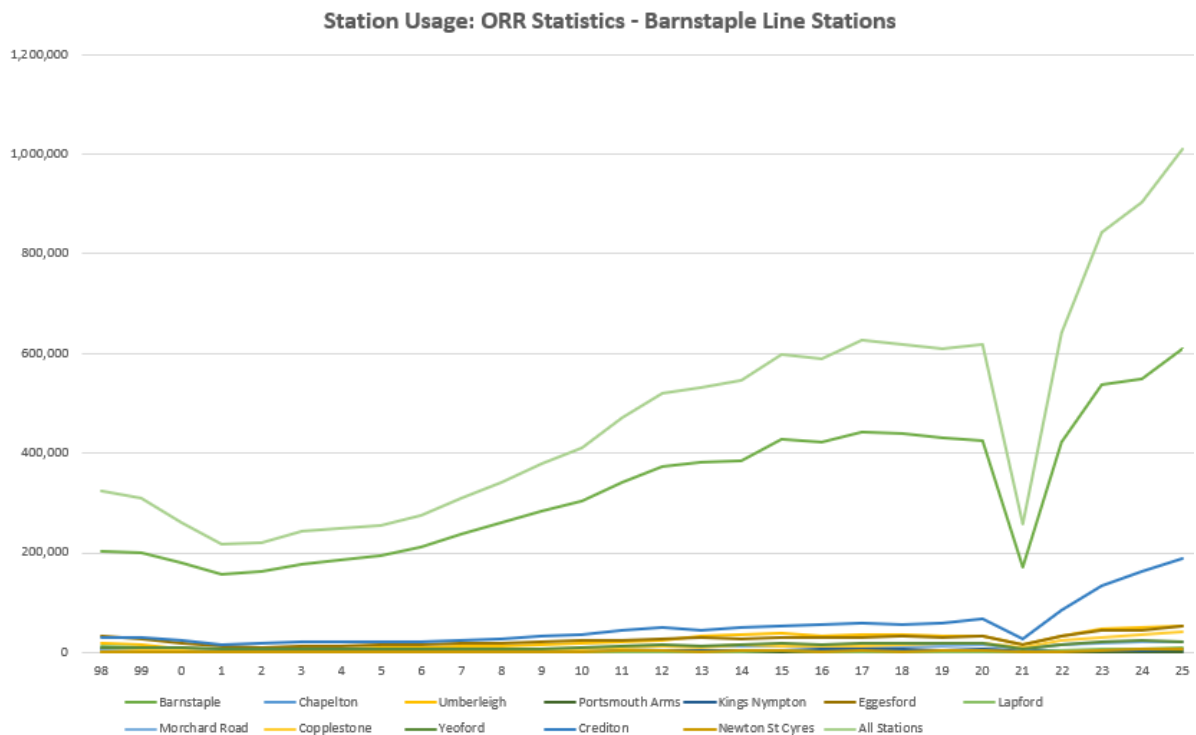
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following damage by flood waters to the track bed in several places between Exeter and Crediton and bridge scour risks at other locations. The Okehampton line later reopened, but Barnstaple remained closed until 20 February 2026.

The *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>56</sup> puts substantial emphasis on the importance of resilience of transport links, as risks to road and rail networks from severe weather are not limited to the Barnstaple route. “Protecting and enhancing the reliability, resilience and safety of the local transport network and the strategic road and rail links that connect Devon and Torbay to the rest of the country” is one of the six objectives adopted.

Although not an inherent characteristic of the route itself, at the date this document was being written, issues with GWR’s train fleet meant that it was not consistently able to roster the 3/4-car trains which are now normally meant to operate Barnstaple line services. Use of shorter 2-car trains leads to crowding and in the worst case passengers left behind at intermediate stations, in particular at peak times. That causes further delay, as passengers take longer to board and to alight.

The ORR station usage statistics<sup>57</sup> in the following chart show how usage of the route has grown. In stark contrast to most parts of the country, where usage generally remains below pre-pandemic levels, usage on the Barnstaple route far exceeds the highest pre-COVID levels. Indeed, although usage dipped heavily during the pandemic, it still exceeded the numbers carried at the line’s lowest ebb in 2001.

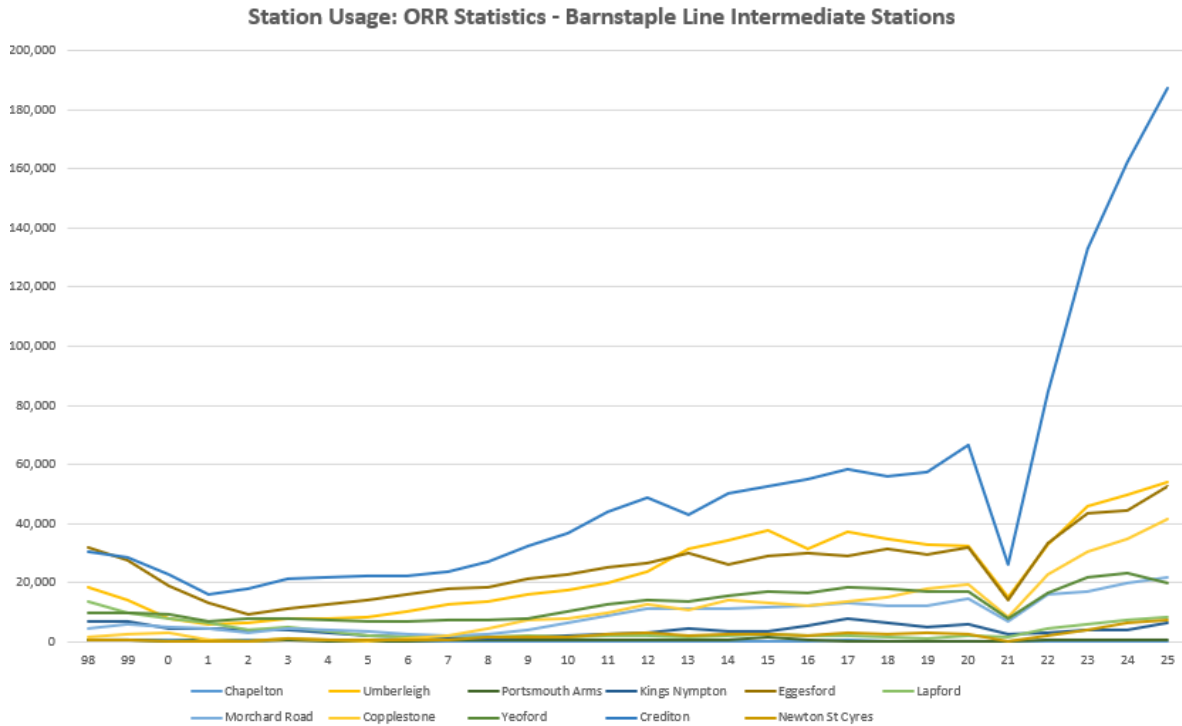


It should also be noted that, while they are individually much smaller than Barnstaple, which remains dominant as the key inter-urban flow, jointly the smaller intermediate stations represent a very significant proportion of overall usage. Several have shown particularly strong growth in the last ten years in particular, albeit from a much smaller base in terms of absolute passenger numbers. The following chart omits the Barnstaple and overall line figures in order to show the changes at the intermediate stations more clearly.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>57</sup> *Estimates of station usage April 2023 to March 2024*, Office of Rail & Road, November 2024.

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Crediton has grown very much more strongly than the other stations following the increases in train service frequency in November 2021 and May 2022 resulting from the reintroduction of regular train services to Okehampton and their subsequent increase in frequency from two-hourly to hourly in May 2022. The other intermediate stations can be grouped as follows:

- Behind Crediton there is a group of five stations with higher levels of usage, which have also shown longer-term growth: Umberleigh, Eggesford, Copplestone, Yeoford and Morcharad Road;
- A third group is at lower levels of usage, but is starting to show post-pandemic growth: Lapford, Kings Nympton and Newton St Cyres; and
- A fourth group at the northern end of the line shows both very low levels of usage and no long-term growth: Chapelton and Portsmouth Arms.

So strong has recent growth been that there are regular reports both from users and train crew of severe crowding on peak hour services. That is in spite of the fact that the three-coach trains now in use represent a circa 50% increase in capacity compared to the two-coach trains used until before the pandemic. The growth has also taken place during a period since June 2022 when there have been strikes by the three main rail unions, resulting in widespread cancellation and disruption to train services. The growth has also come in spite of bus fares being capped as part of the Government’s initiative to support the bus industry post-pandemic (originally £2, now £3).

Why have passenger numbers increased so strongly compared to most other parts of the country? The following points appear to be relevant:

- While there are of course office workers in Exeter, most of those travelling there by train are not 9-5 office workers with the option to work at least some time remotely from home, but work in sectors where personal attendance is required;
- Many users of the train service use it for educational purposes requiring personal attendance, in particular tertiary education. Exeter College is reported as continuing to expand;
- The big expansion in capacity since 2019 through the introduction of three and four-coach trains is likely to have released some demand previously suppressed by crowding on the shorter two-coach trains previously used;
- Sunday services doubled in frequency at the December 2019 timetable change: leisure traffic is reported as the fastest growing sector of rail usage across the country post-pandemic and a fuller 7-day service makes the train a more viable option for shift-based and shop workers;

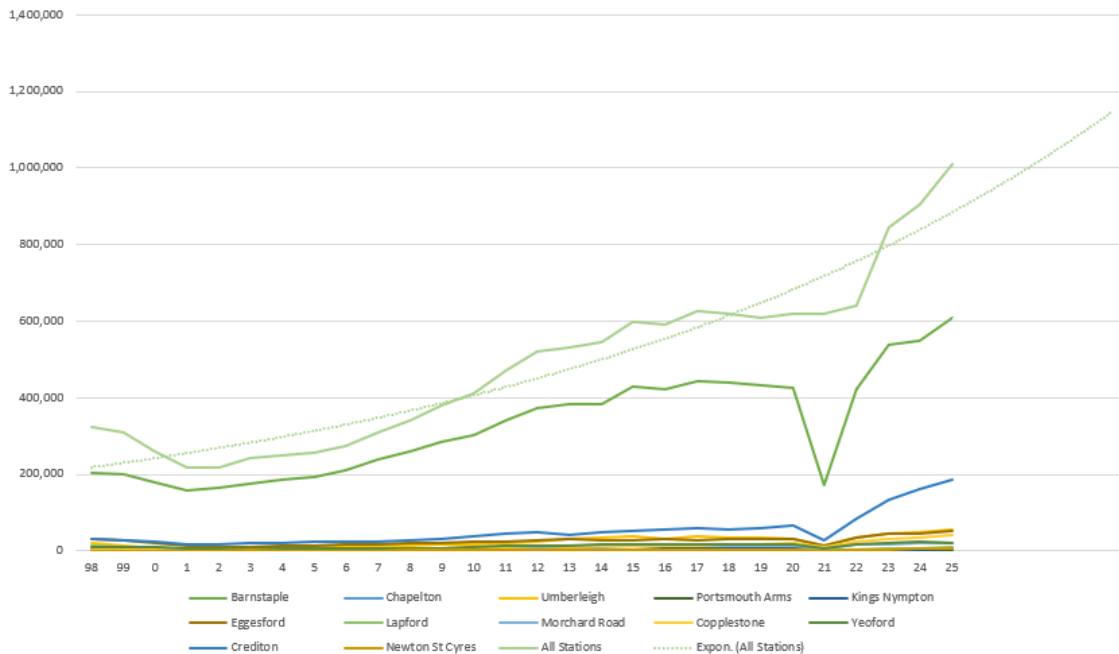
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- The South West as a whole has shown generally stronger performance in terms of post-COVID usage levels compared to most other parts of the country;
- Frequency between Crediton and Exeter has doubled to twice an hour following the reintroduction of Okehampton train services in November 2021, which increased from 2-hourly to hourly in May 2022; and
- In spite of the big drop in usage during the COVID pandemic, many passengers were still carried in that period. More passengers used the route during the difficult pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 with lockdowns and other restrictions on travel and socialising than travelled during 2001/2002, emphasising the route’s continuing importance as a transport corridor even in the difficult pandemic times.

The following chart (author) uses the trend projection function<sup>58</sup> in the Microsoft Excel application to project the ORR station usage figures forward five years to 2030. In line with the cautious approach taken elsewhere in this document, the trend has been taken across the whole period for which figures are available. It is recognised that the trend shown in the chart may prove conservative. Nevertheless, even on this conservative basis, usage is well above one million passengers a year by 2030. This is clearly no traditional sleepy country branch line.

**Station Usage: ORR Statistics - Barnstaple Line Stations**



*Objective 3) Improve socio-economic conditions in the Northern Devon and Mid Devon areas by reducing the negative impacts of peripherality, assisting in lifting productivity, prosperity and local economic growth*

Districts alphabetical		Districts numeric		National rank out of 375 UK LAs
UK	£32,876	Exeter	£47,259	35
England	£33,809	England	£33,809	[92]
South West	£29,147	UK	£32,876	[105]
Devon CC	£24,403	South West	£29,147	[149]
East Devon	£22,480	South Hams	£27,025	177
Exeter	£47,259 →	North Devon	£26,765	183
Mid-Devon	£20,429 ←	Plymouth	£25,236	223
North Devon	£26,765 ←	Devon CC	£24,403	[241]
Plymouth	£25,236	East Devon	£22,480	278
South Hams	£27,025	Teignbridge	£22,044	286
Teignbridge	£22,044 →	Mid-Devon	£20,429	313
Torbay	£17,671	Torbay	£17,671	358
Torrige	£17,493 ←	West Devon	£17,631	360
West Devon	£17,631 →	Torrige	£17,493	362

Torrige, North Devon and Mid Devon appear low on national rankings of economic performance. Torrige is ranked in the lowest 4% of GDP per capita for the whole of the UK. Exeter ranks much higher.

Graphic: Tim Steer, source ONS.

<sup>58</sup> The exponential trend function was chosen as having the best fit with the longer-term carryings – judged optically. In order to prevent the much lower carryings in 2021 resulting from the COVID pandemic from providing a one-off distortion, the 2020 carryings were repeated for that year to smooth the trend.

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

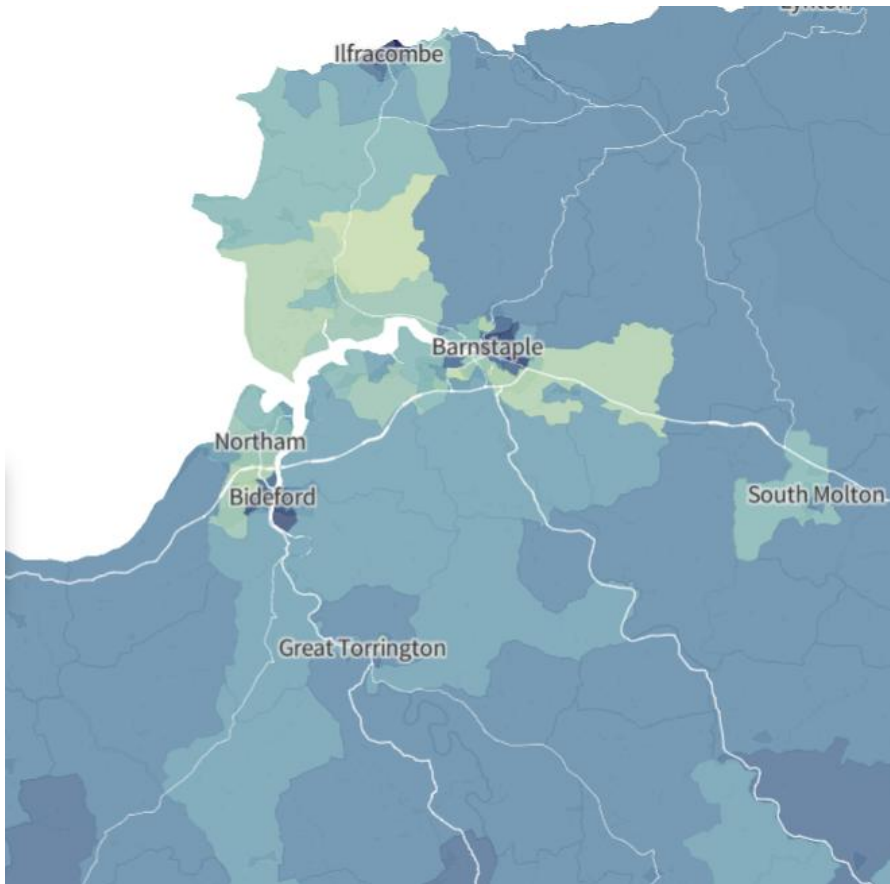
### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

Districts alphabetical	Weekly wages		Districts numeric	Weekly wages	National rank out of 362 GB LAs
East Devon	£574.90		Exeter	£597	146
Exeter	£596.80		East Devon	£575	189
Mid-Devon	£565.80	←→	Mid-Devon	£566	214
North Devon	£527.00	←	South Hams	£564	221
Plymouth	£542.40		Plymouth	£542	274
South Hams	£563.70		Torbay	£529	303
Teignbridge	£522.60	→	North Devon	£527	306
Torbay	£528.70		Teignbridge	£523	313
Torrige	£485.70	←→	Torrige	£486	355
West Devon	£464.70		West Devon	£465	359

Reflecting the GDP position, Torrige and North Devon rank very low in weekly wages compared to the rest of the UK, with Mid Devon somewhat better. Torrige is in the lowest 5% of districts and North Devon in the lowest 15%. Exeter ranks much higher.

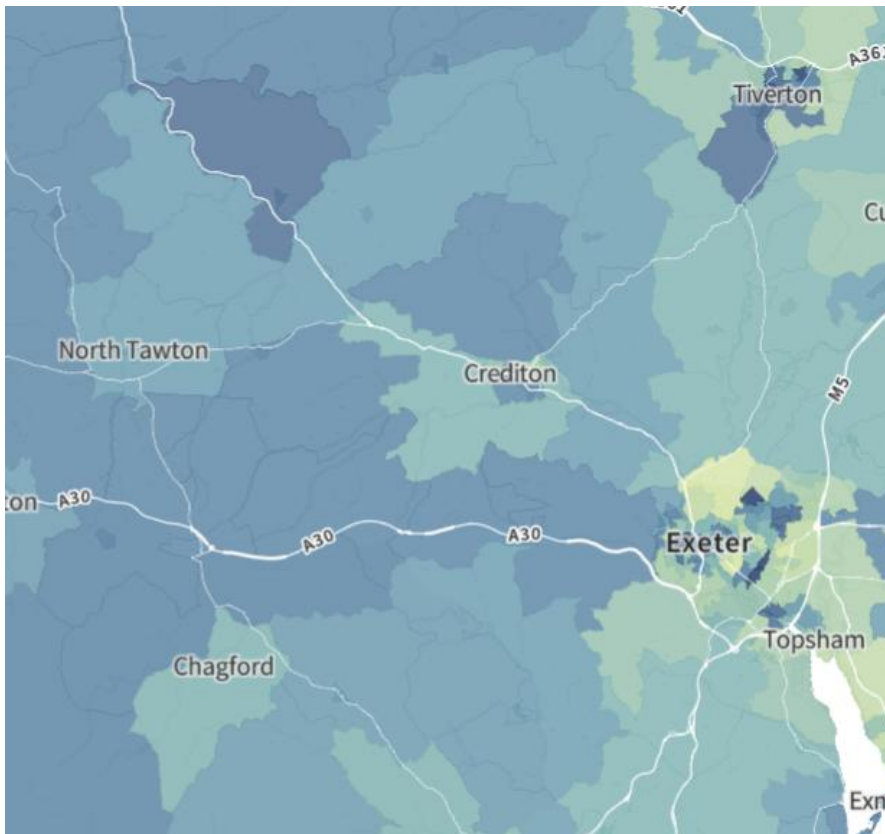
Graphic: Tim Steer, source ONS.

The overall picture in terms of deprivation is complex, with pockets of greater affluence alongside areas of higher deprivation. However, the overall picture tends towards the lower end of the national scale in North Devon, Mid Devon and Torrige (maps from *English Indices of Deprivation 2025*<sup>59</sup> - darkest blue = most deprived, lighter blue/yellow = least deprived):



<sup>59</sup> <https://deprivation.communities.gov.uk/maps?type=imd&geog=isoa#9.99/50.9844/-4.189>

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Housing affordability in Devon's 10 District & Unitary Councils, March 2021  
Ratio of median house prices to median workplace-based annual earnings by LA district, England and Wales, 2021

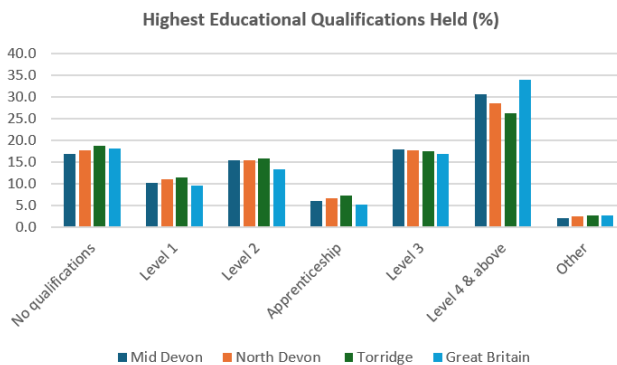
Devon Districts, alphabetical	Ratio	Districts, numeric = national rank of 331 LAs in England & Wales	Rank
East Devon	10.88	South Hams	12.56 62
Exeter	9.22	West Devon	11.96 77
Mid-Devon	9.29	Teignbridge	11.4 91
North Devon	10.46	East Devon	10.88 104
Plymouth	7.27	North Devon	10.46 121
South Hams	12.56	Torridge	10.34 128
Teignbridge	11.4	Mid-Devon	9.29 162
Torbay	8.9	Exeter	9.22 166
Torridge	10.34	<b>ENGLAND</b>	<b>9.1 170</b>
West Devon	11.96	Torbay	8.9 180
<b>ENGLAND</b>	<b>9.1</b>	Plymouth	7.27 230

Of historic Devon County's 10 LAs, 8 have housing which is less affordable than the English average  
Divergence in house prices compared to earnings in local authorities are becoming larger over time

Source: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/datasets/housingaffordabilitybylocalauthorityinenglandandwales2021>

Reflecting the wider socio-economic situation, housing affordability in Torridge, North Devon and Mid Devon is significantly worse than the average for England.

Graphic: Tim Steer



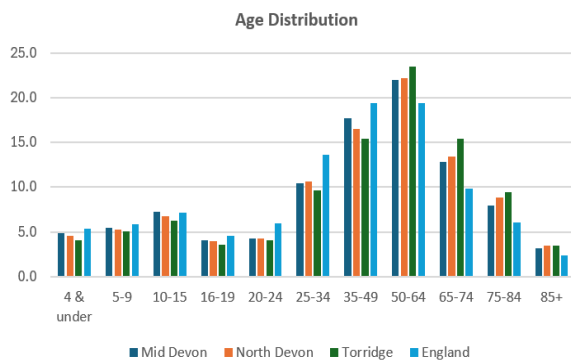
Compared to England as a whole, materially fewer Mid Devon, North Devon and Torridge residents have Level 4 qualifications or above. This suggests a correlation with the lower proportion of the working population in professional and other managerial occupations shown in the charts under Objective 5).

Source: Chart by author using Nomis<sup>60</sup> 2021 Census data

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

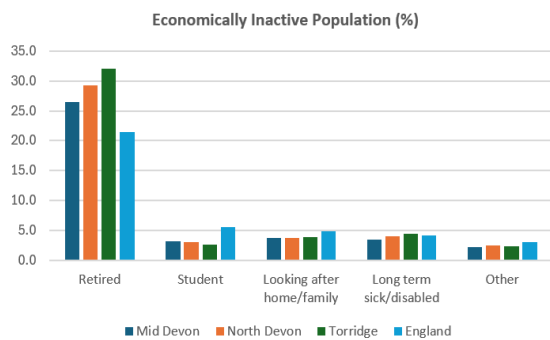
# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

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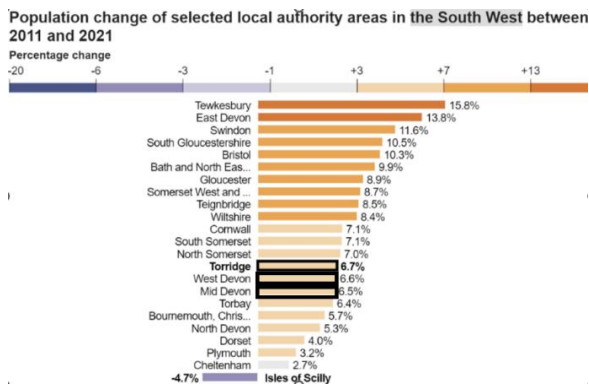


Mid Devon, North Devon and Torrington have a markedly older population than England as a whole. North Devon and Torrington have both a smaller proportion of younger people and a much higher proportion of older people within their populations than England.

Source: chart by author using Nomis<sup>61</sup> 2021 Census data



The chart shows that, while Mid Devon is comparable with the rest of England in terms of the proportion of the population that is not economically active, both North Devon and Torrington have materially larger proportions of the population not economically active. The higher proportion of retired people tallies with the higher age profile in Northern Devon. Charts by author using Nomis<sup>62</sup> 2021 Census data



Mid Devon, North Devon and Torrington's population increases are very similar. They are lower than the increase for the South West as a whole (7.8%), but higher than for some other areas in the South West. This is a strong level of population growth and suggests that many of the factors discussed in this section will continue as the number of people living in the area continues to increase. Source: Office for National Statistics.

The figures in the tables above show that Northern Devon and Mid Devon rank low on a number of socio-economic indicators directly reflecting people's everyday lives. However, they are snapshots at a particular recent time. It is also important to gain a sense of change over time and forward trend.

Two charts shown in the Tavistock railway reopening *Strategic Outline Business Case*<sup>63</sup> help gain that sense of change over time. Both cover Gross Value Added ("the measure of the value of goods and services produced in an area, industry or sector of an economy"<sup>64</sup>), in this case for the whole of the South West. They reinforce the points made above by showing not only a gap between the South West and the rest of the United Kingdom, but also that this has got materially worse over the last 20 years and that the gap is likely to continue to worsen.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

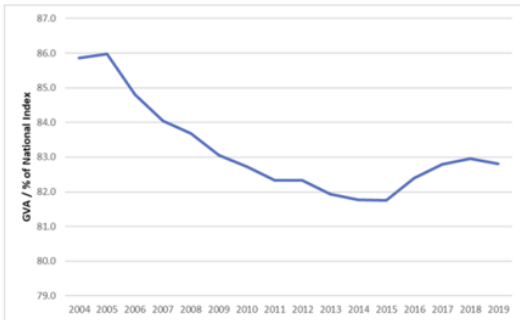
<sup>63</sup> Devon County Council - *Tavistock-Plymouth Line Reopening Strategic Outline Business Case – Restoring Your Railway: RYR387*, 22 September 2022: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/outline-business-case-submitted-for-reopening-tavistock-to-plymouth-rail-line/>

<sup>64</sup> Wikipedia.

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

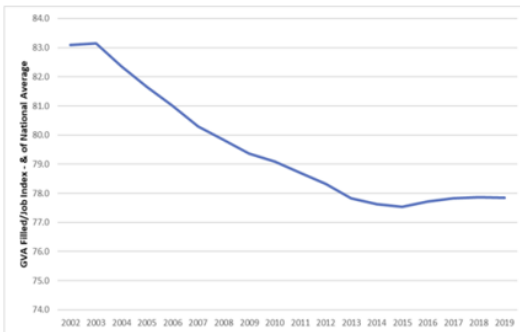
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Figure 2-11 - Heart of the South-West GVA/Hour - Per Cent of National Average



The adjacent chart shows both that there is a relative gap compared to the rest of the United Kingdom and that it has worsened considerably over nearly 20 years. Improvements since 2015 started to reverse again after 2018. It is difficult to see how it will have improved post- COVID.

Figure 2-12 – Heart of the South-West GVA/Filled Job – Per Cent of National Average



Two important points emerge from consideration of the second chart. Firstly, for nearly 20 years new jobs filled in the South West have shown lower GVA per job filled than the wider position in the first chart. Secondly, that gap has been widening.

Source: ONS & Heart of South-West LEP

Another indicator incorporating an element of change over time and trend is the *UK Competitiveness Index*<sup>65</sup>. This is compiled by researchers at Cardiff University and Nottingham Business School and “assesses the competitiveness of local authority areas, local enterprise partnerships, cities and city regions across England, Wales and Scotland” in a time series starting in 2000. It is among the indicators recommended in the Department for Transport’s guidance on levelling up.

The authors define competitiveness as: “the capability of an economy to attract and maintain firms with stable or rising market shares in an activity, while maintaining stable or increasing standards of living for those who participate in it”.

The 2023 report shows Torrington, North Devon and Mid Devon very low in the rankings. Concerningly, the wider context is that the UK’s overall international competitiveness dropped substantially in the same period. These drops are part of a longer-term trend similar to the one shown for GVA, with steep drops earlier in the 2000s subsequently flattening out.

One thing the maps do not show are the rankings of individual cities smaller than the larger areas used in the maps. Exeter ranked 12 out of 47 cities in both 2023 and 2019, with an UKCI score of 100.9 in 2023 notably higher than any of the surrounding areas.

The 2008 report shows Exeter as ranking 19 out of 44, meaning that in contrast to its surrounding areas, it has improved significantly. This suggests a correlation with the city’s ‘honeypot’<sup>66</sup> reputation and the conclusions of the Devon County Council *Transport Strategy for the Market & Coastal Towns and Rural Areas* that better transport links are needed to Exeter and other larger more dynamic employment areas. That conclusion is supported by the following remarks in section 5.3 of the *Index* report: “As has been suggested by other studies, cities appear to be increasingly more dominant during this period and have improved their competitiveness relative to those areas with significant rural areas. The most rural areas, on the other hand, have fallen back on average.”

The report does not contain graphics by local area, but does contain the following two maps showing the national geographical distribution of competitiveness (the map on the left shows the distribution of

<sup>65</sup> <https://cforic.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/UKCI-2023.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> The fourth highest overall score in the PWC *Good for Growth Index* among UK cities in 2025: <https://www.pwc.co.uk/industries/government-public-sector/good-growth.html>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

competitiveness in 2023, while the map on the right shows changes in the geographical distribution of competitiveness between 2019 and 2023):

FIGURE 3.01: GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF COMPETITIVENESS IN 2023 (UK=100)

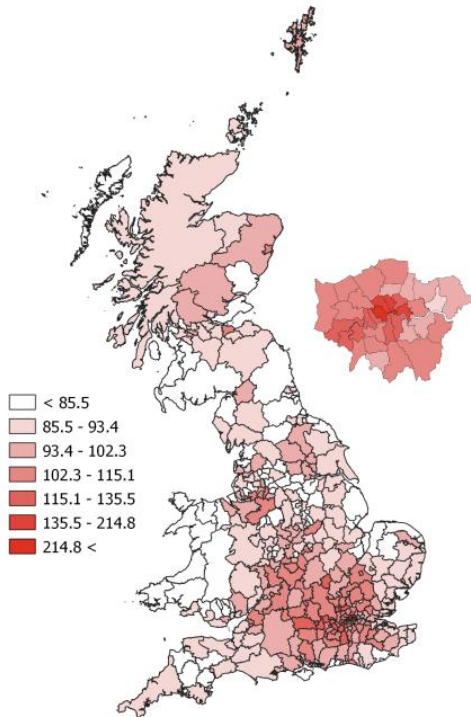
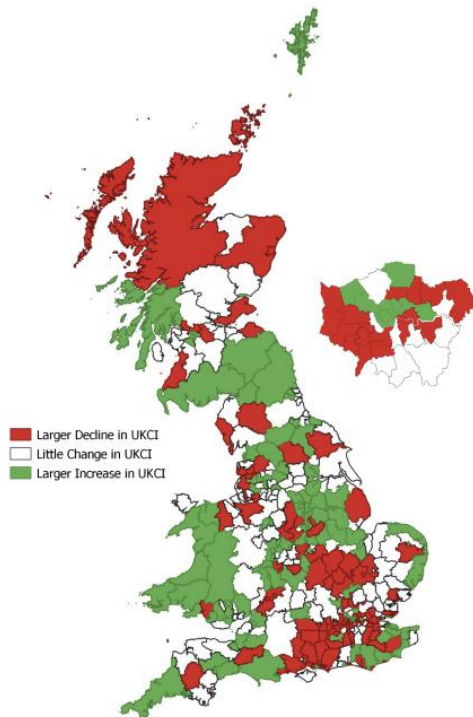


FIGURE 4.01: GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES DISPLAYING LARGER INCREASES A DECREASES IN UKCI BETWEEN 2019 AND 2023



This objective and the supporting analysis focus on how poor accessibility/peripherality affect businesses and wider social welfare. The backdrop is the concern expressed in parts of the literature about whether transport investments do actually stimulate regeneration. For example, the review by the Department for Transport’s economics team concludes<sup>67</sup>: “Overall, there is not enough information from ex-post studies to rigorously quantify the impact of transport improvements on economic geography. Hence, there is little that can be concluded from them in general about the scale and likelihood of location impacts. However, this does not mean the effects are not there – most of the studies have either not rigorously sought out GDP impacts, or didn’t have large schemes in their samples.”

The same document also concludes that a transport scheme needs to be part of a wider picture to achieve the best outcome: “Overall, there is a consensus that transport schemes can help regeneration schemes achieve their aims. However, transport schemes on their own are very unlikely to lead to regeneration – they need to be part of a complementary package of regeneration measures.”

The Management Case explores further how this best outcome might be achieved, in particular looking at what has already been achieved on the reopened Borders Railway between Edinburgh and Tweedbank via Galashiels and what is being done for the more recently opened Northumberland Line from Newcastle.

In a similar vein, it is recognised that the Department’s guidance<sup>68</sup> highlights difficulties in identifying growth and changes to GDP resulting from transport investments. In line with the generally cautious approach adopted in this document, no claims about wider national GDP/growth effects are made. The guidance explains that GDP effects are generally captured within the wider welfare-based appraisal approach recommended: “The Department’s appraisal process is based on the principles of the HM Treasury *Green Book* guidance, which advocates the use of cost benefit (welfare) analysis to determine value for money. Welfare analysis is used as it

<sup>67</sup> *What is the Impact of Transport Schemes on Economic Geography? Summary of Position in DfT Guidance, and Supporting Evidence*, November 2011: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b21ef40f0b66eab99f35b/impact-transport-on-economic-geography.pdf>

<sup>68</sup> *TAG Unit A2.1 Wider Economic Impacts Appraisal*, May 2019: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fc8b4bdd3bf7f7f52707867/tag-a2-1-wider-economic-impacts-appraisal.pdf>

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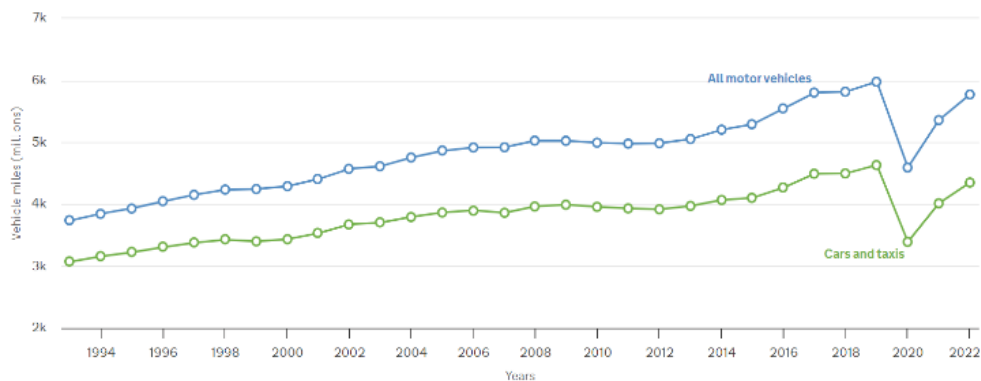
captures a broad range of impacts, such as economic, environmental and social. Whilst GDP and GVA are useful economic indicators of economic performance they are not a substitute for welfare based measures used to inform the assessment of Value for Money.”

*Objective 4) Enable rail and more sustainable active and public transport modes to take an increased share of overall transport demand, itself growing as local population and housing increase, to contribute towards decarbonising transport on the Northern Devon - Exeter corridor*

The following graph shows how road traffic of all sorts has grown substantially since 1994. Except for the COVID pandemic period, road traffic of all sorts in Devon has shown continuous growth. Moreover, it has resumed strong growth following the COVID pandemic.<sup>69</sup>

#### Annual traffic by vehicle type in Devon

Traffic in Great Britain from 1993 to 2022 by vehicle type in vehicle miles (millions)



Figures from the commercial INRIX<sup>70</sup> international traffic congestion monitoring website show that both Barnstaple and Exeter perform poorly for road traffic congestion with Barnstaple and Exeter high in both United Kingdom and international rankings.

None of this will be surprising to the local population, who have long complained about road congestion. The fact that local road networks are both congested and have little resilience is shown by the widely reported major disruption by relatively minor works to the Cedars Roundabout in Bickington in 2025, leading to long delays for all traffic, with buses unable to maintain their timetables.

Perhaps the most surprising thing for a town of around only 31,000 population is that Barnstaple figures in an international comparison of this sort at all. Nearly all the other cities in the INRIX rankings are much larger cities of the sort most people might associate with serious traffic congestion. As with the much smaller Barnstaple, Exeter ranks high for its size (around 129,000 population), both internationally and within the UK. The estimates show material amounts of time and economic adverse impacts.

Most of the analysis in this document focuses on the potential benefits to Northern and Mid Devon from improvements to the Exeter to Barnstaple route. The congestion figures for Exeter shown above suggest that, if an improved Barnstaple rail route could attract existing and future potential car users to travel by train instead, it could also be of benefit to Exeter as a city. In line with this, one of the key thrusts of the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>71</sup> (LTP) is to improve sustainable travel options rather than to attempt to build additional capacity for cars within a constrained environment: “The city of Exeter is built on an historic highway network that is constrained by limited road crossings of the River Exe. It is therefore not generally possible to build extra physical highway capacity within the city. Instead, the strategy for Exeter focuses on improving sustainable travel choices and making the city a more attractive place to live, work and visit.” It summarises the approach as: “Enable easier travel into the city from outside Exeter’s boundaries”, which is in line with the scheme to modernise the Exeter to Barnstaple line.

The LTP explains how Exeter has seen very large increases in the numbers of jobs and the size of its travel to work area: “The city’s growth in recent years has led to increasing travel demand. Between 2000 and 2020, the

<sup>69</sup> *Road Traffic Statistics*, Department for Transport, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> [inrix.com](https://www.inrix.com)

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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number of jobs in the city increased from 60,000 to 100,000. Over the same period the population of the city grew by just under 25,000 people. The growth in jobs in Exeter has been filled by labour from outside the city and as a result the city now has one of the largest geographical Travel to Work Areas (TTWA) in the country.” It also includes the following maps showing the expansion of the TTWA:

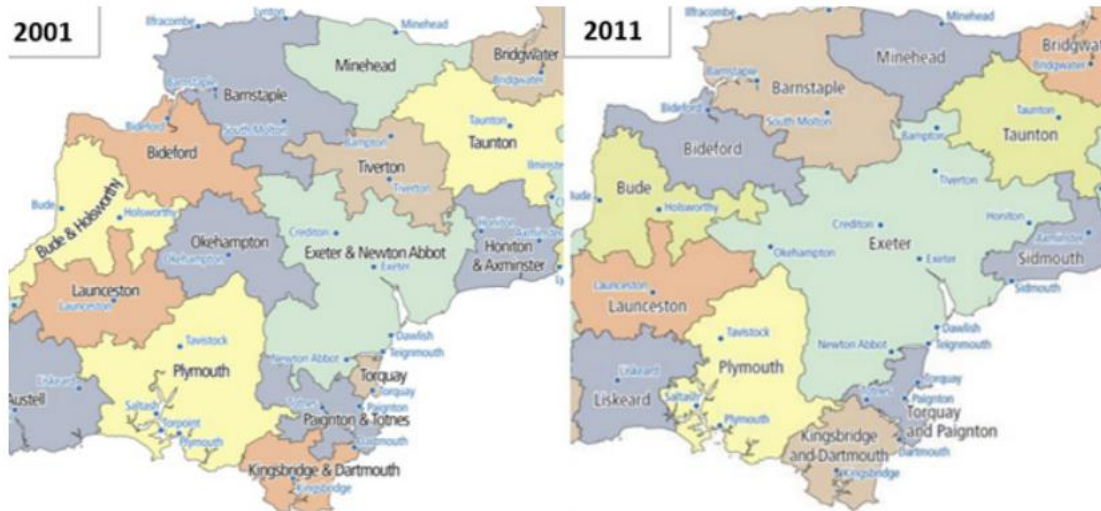


Figure 11 – Exeter’s Travel To Work Area in 2001 (left) and in 2011 (right).

While the Exeter TTWA appears not (at least by 2011) to have moved further north towards Barnstaple, it has expanded substantially east and west of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line, including to the area around Okehampton. Faster, more frequent trains with more usable intermediate stations with better car parking and improved access for other users could stand to benefit from these changes, which also tally with the increases in traffic already seen at the intermediate stations as explored elsewhere in this document. Although a separate scheme, the LTP vision for an ‘Exeter Metro’ with more frequent cross-Exeter train services would be facilitated by improvements to train services on the Barnstaple line (see the Management Case).

Discussions with Exeter University’s Sustainability Manager suggest benefits to Exeter from modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line could potentially be substantial. The University has sustainability goals to achieve, including from reducing emissions from commuting and could benefit from using parking places for other purposes. Currently it has around 6,000 staff, of whom around 30% commute in single-occupancy cars. Many students also have cars. The Sustainability Manager explained that the University has been in dialogue with other major employers in the city, who have similar concerns and see similar patterns.

It would only take a small proportion of these commuters who come from the Northern and Mid Devon areas

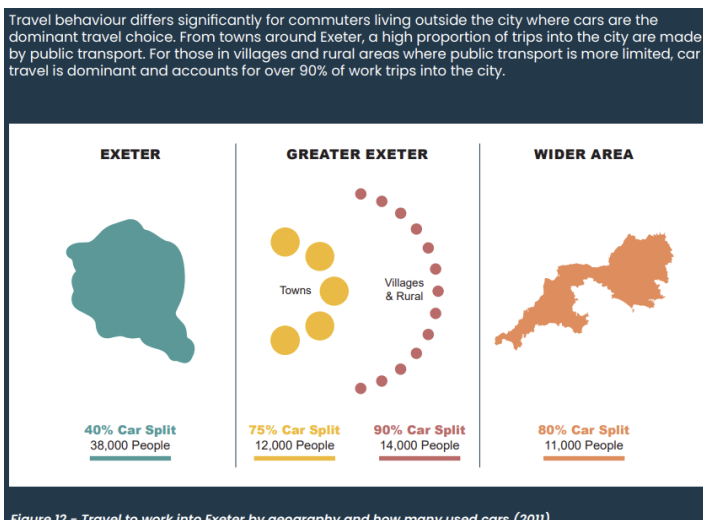


Figure 12 – Travel to work into Exeter by geography and how many used cars (2011).

to switch to rail to provide a substantial uplift in train usage and therefore ticket revenue.

The adjacent graphic, also from the new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>72</sup>, shows the substantial proportions of people in the Exeter TTWA from local towns and villages who travel by car rather than by public transport (75% and 90% respectively). Seen from this perspective, it is not surprising that Crediton and other intermediate stations on the southern end of the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route have seen such strong growth in passenger usage in recent years.

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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Research undertaken on behalf of the Devon & Cornwall Community Rail Partnership at Crediton in September 2024 shared with the author shows that of the passengers who had started travelling by train from Crediton since the increase in frequency of train services following the reinstatement of train services to Okehampton, 19% had previously driven or been a car passenger.

The Tavistock train reinstatement business case examines a very similar set of arguments in relation to the Babcock-operated naval dockyard in Plymouth, which also both needs to reduce its environmental impacts and would benefit from car parking areas being used for more productive purposes. That business case has more detailed analysis of the numbers of car users involved and the potential switch to rail. Similar analysis should be undertaken here as this business case develops.

*Objective 5) Enhance access to employment opportunities, education and healthcare in Exeter and beyond for Northern Devon and Mid Devon residents, facilitate access to 'hard-to-recruit' jobs for people outside these areas, in particular through improving station usability for all passengers*

Employee jobs (2022)				
	North Devon (Employee Jobs)	North Devon (%)	South West (%)	Great Britain (%)
Total Employee Jobs	42,000	-	-	-
Full-Time	26,000	61.9	65.0	68.8
Part-Time	16,000	38.1	35.0	31.2
<b>Employee Jobs By Industry</b>				
B : Mining And Quarrying	20	0.0	0.1	0.2
C : Manufacturing	6,000	14.3	8.6	7.6
D : Electricity, Gas, Steam And Air Conditioning Supply	125	0.3	0.4	0.4
E : Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management And Remediation Activities	200	0.5	1.0	0.7
F : Construction	2,250	5.4	5.5	4.9
G : Wholesale And Retail Trade; Repair Of Motor Vehicles And Motorcycles	7,000	16.7	13.7	14.0
H : Transportation And Storage	900	2.1	4.3	5.0
I : Accommodation And Food Service Activities	6,000	14.3	9.9	8.0
J : Information And Communication	500	1.2	3.3	4.6
K : Financial And Insurance Activities	250	0.6	2.8	3.3
L : Real Estate Activities	700	1.7	1.8	1.9
M : Professional, Scientific And Technical Activities	2,500	6.0	8.4	9.1
N : Administrative And Support Service Activities	2,000	4.8	7.1	9.0
O : Public Administration And Defence; Compulsory Social Security	1,000	2.4	4.4	4.7
P : Education	4,000	9.5	9.4	8.6
Q : Human Health And Social Work Activities	7,000	16.7	14.5	13.5
R : Arts, Entertainment And Recreation	1,000	2.4	2.8	2.4
S : Other Service Activities	700	1.7	1.9	2.0

Source: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey : open access  
 - Data unavailable  
 Notes: % is a proportion of total employee jobs excluding farm-based agriculture  
 Employee jobs excludes self-employed, government-supported trainees and HM Forces  
 Data excludes farm-based agriculture

The adjacent table from NOMIS<sup>73</sup> analyses ONS employment data for North Devon. Key features of the local employment market include notably higher than regional or national employment levels in manufacturing and accommodation/food service, but lower levels in typically better paying professional/scientific/technical and administrative roles.

Employee jobs (2022)				
	Mid Devon (Employee Jobs)	Mid Devon (%)	South West (%)	Great Britain (%)
Total Employee Jobs	26,000	-	-	-
Full-Time	17,000	65.4	65.0	68.8
Part-Time	9,000	34.6	35.0	31.2
<b>Employee Jobs By Industry</b>				
B : Mining And Quarrying	50	0.2	0.1	0.2
C : Manufacturing	4,500	17.3	8.6	7.6
D : Electricity, Gas, Steam And Air Conditioning Supply	75	0.3	0.4	0.4
E : Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management And Remediation Activities	225	0.9	1.0	0.7
F : Construction	2,000	7.7	5.5	4.9
G : Wholesale And Retail Trade; Repair Of Motor Vehicles And Motorcycles	4,500	17.3	13.7	14.0
H : Transportation And Storage	1,500	5.8	4.3	5.0
I : Accommodation And Food Service Activities	2,000	7.7	9.9	8.0
J : Information And Communication	300	1.2	3.3	4.6
K : Financial And Insurance Activities	175	0.7	2.8	3.3
L : Real Estate Activities	400	1.5	1.8	1.9
M : Professional, Scientific And Technical Activities	1,500	5.8	8.4	9.1
N : Administrative And Support Service Activities	1,250	4.8	7.1	9.0
O : Public Administration And Defence; Compulsory Social Security	600	2.3	4.4	4.7
P : Education	3,000	11.5	9.4	8.6
Q : Human Health And Social Work Activities	2,500	9.6	14.5	13.5
R : Arts, Entertainment And Recreation	700	2.7	2.8	2.4
S : Other Service Activities	400	1.5	1.9	2.0

Source: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey : open access  
 - Data unavailable  
 Notes: % is a proportion of total employee jobs excluding farm-based agriculture

As seen in the adjacent table, Mid Devon is similar to North Devon in having a strong manufacturing presence in its workforce. However, it has lower numbers working in accommodation/food service and higher levels in typically better paying professional/scientific/technical and administrative roles. This correlates with a greater tendency towards commuting to Exeter noted in the Mid Devon Local Plan.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157364/report.aspx#tabempunemp>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

The Navantis-owned shipyard at Appledore is one of Northern Devon's largest employers. At the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance launch on 1 March 2024, General Manager Tom Hart explained that the company is winning new contracts and that the total number of employees is due to rise to 350 from 200. While many can be recruited locally, he explained that the location is not easy to access and that many specialists do need to come from further afield: "Improved rail networks in this area especially a line from Barnstaple to Bideford is in our opinion a must to support our business. So, I am very much in favour."

Other sustainable industries are planned for the Northern Devon area, including wind-powered electricity generation. This wider context of future-focused industrial innovation is important, as transport improvements such as reinstated train services are enablers of successful place-making and can only fully succeed within a wider context of successful economic development policy.

Appledore's shipbuilding heritage also forms the centre of plans to focus on sustainable industries, building on Torrridge's strengths in the manufacturing sector. The Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre benefits from a grant from the Government's Levelling Up Fund.

Other sustainable industries are planned for the area, including wind-powered electricity generation. This wider context of future-focused industrial innovation is important, as transport improvements such as reinstated train services are enablers of successful place-making and can only fully succeed within a wider context of successful economic development policy.



At a presentation given on 9 July 2024 following the second meeting of the Northern Devon Rail Development Alliance, the shipyard's General Manager Mark Lawther gave a presentation about the company's capabilities and plans for the Appledore. The adjacent slide was presented showing how the Appledore site is seen as part of "an eco-maritime cluster where synergies will drive regional technology success".

The American academic Michael Porter has been central to the development of the concept of the economic cluster. In an article in the *Harvard Business Review*<sup>74</sup>, he defines clusters in the following way: "Clusters are geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field. Clusters encompass an array of linked industries and other entities important to competition."

While much work can be done on-line nowadays, the importance attached in cluster theory to personal relationships born of social interaction suggests that success will be helped by transport networks that enable personal interaction. Porter picks up this theme in the article cited above, which focuses on why clusters are still critical in economic success and concludes that the strength of the strongest clusters is growing in a high tech world. One of Porter's conclusions is that: "Governments—both national and local—have new roles to play. They must ensure the supply of high-quality inputs such as educated citizens and physical infrastructure."

The cluster includes locations in Torrridge, North Devon, Plymouth, Cornwall and South Gloucestershire (South West Maritime Academy), all of which could be much more easily accessed by a modernised Barnstaple train service.

Porter's work on economic clusters, with its emphasis on human interaction through geographical propinquity, can also if inverted explain why locations suffering from peripherality find it difficult to attract new economic activity. Several of the case studies on the Borders Railway reopening explored in the Management Case focus on how the reinstated railway encouraged firms to establish new bases in the Borders area because the railway allowed staff to remain in contact with the powerful economic centre of Edinburgh.

A presentation on the case in favour of East West Rail (EWR) made by its strategy director and heard by the author of this document explained that much of the case in favour of EWR is based on boosting the cluster effects around centres such as Oxford and Cambridge. He also explained how important travel to work opportunities for workers' life partners can be, with EWR aiming to give multiple travel and connectional opportunities: workers are often reluctant to relocate if their partner cannot find suitable work opportunities.

More traditional school-based sixth form education is available in Barnstaple, Bideford and Crediton. Given the lack of alternative public transport from many stations, the Exeter to Barnstaple route is already well used for schools traffic.

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<sup>74</sup> <https://hbr.org/1998/11/clusters-and-the-new-economics-of-competition>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

A wider range of courses and vocational training is offered by Petroc College located on Sticklepath Hill close to Barnstaple station. It offers<sup>75</sup>: “a wide range of courses for students of all ages and abilities including A Levels, vocational courses, T Levels, degrees, apprenticeships and adult part-time courses.”

Exeter College<sup>76</sup> is located in number of locations in Exeter, including in the city centre close to both Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central stations. It offers a particularly wide range of courses and apprenticeships, with a focus on job placements in the Exeter area with its strong economy and vibrant social life. It recruits students from a wide area in the South West.

Exeter College opened a public consultation<sup>77</sup> on a potential ‘voluntary’ merger between it and Petroc College on 1 September 2025. The consultation was due to end in November 2025, with a potential merger date of 5 January 2026. If the merger happens, it is hard to judge at this early stage exactly what the effect on train service demand might be. Some argue that it could reduce demand, with more students opting to stay in Barnstaple. The Principles of Exeter College and Petroc Colleges say that a merger could offer more opportunities, which might mean some Barnstaple students taking advantage of Exeter College facilities and placements and vice versa for Exeter College students: “By joining forces, each college aims to deliver even greater opportunities for learners, employers and communities across Devon; underpinned by the capacity, capability and resilience offered by being part of a larger group.” (Exeter College); “This merger will give learners more choice, better progression routes and access to specialist facilities, while employers gain a single, stronger partner that is responsive to local skills needs. Above all, it will ensure that North and Mid Devon continue to have high-quality, inclusive education at the heart of their communities.” (Petroc College).

Post-16 students wishing to study outside a more traditional sixth form environment therefore need to travel to Barnstaple or Exeter. Poorer transport connectivity may constrain take-up of those opportunities. Travel for these purposes is not necessarily daily and may vary according to job and other outplacements.

Research undertaken on behalf of the Devon & Cornwall Community Rail Partnership at Crediton in September 2024 shared with the author shows that 16% of the passengers at Crediton who were interviewed were travelling in connection with education or training.

Barnstaple has the North Devon District Hospital, which says<sup>78</sup>: “We offer emergency and urgent care for people in North Devon and the surrounding areas. This includes our emergency department, intensive care unit (ICU), women and children’s services and diagnostics as well as many outpatient clinics and specialist services.”

Crediton has Crediton Hospital, which says<sup>79</sup>: “Crediton is one of the Royal Devon’s community hospitals. These smaller hospitals offer a range of services to provide care locally. ... There are no medical inpatient beds at Crediton Hospital. We aim to care for people in their community.”

Exeter has the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital (Wonford), which says<sup>80</sup> it: “is our largest hospital in the Trust, where many of our acute clinical services are based. This includes our Emergency Department, Walk-in Centre and Minor Injuries Unit (MIU), along with a number of our highly acclaimed specialist units and centres. As a teaching hospital, it delivers undergraduate education for a full range of clinical professions. We are the lead partner for the University of Exeter College of Medicine and Health and a leading centre for high quality research and development in the South West peninsula.” The hospital is around a mile to the south east of Exeter city centre and is connected by direct bus services to both Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central stations. Exeter is also home to other specialist clinics such as the Exeter Oncology Centre.

However, for some specialist care, it is necessary to go further still. For example, the major burns centre for the whole of the South West is at the Southmead Hospital in Bristol.

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<sup>75</sup> <https://www.petroc.ac.uk/about-the-college/>

<sup>76</sup> <https://exe-coll.ac.uk/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://exe-coll.ac.uk/public-consultation-announced/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.royaldevon.nhs.uk/our-sites/north-devon-district-hospital/>

<sup>79</sup> <https://www.royaldevon.nhs.uk/our-sites/crediton-hospital/#>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.royaldevon.nhs.uk/our-sites/royal-devon-and-exeter-hospital-wonford/>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

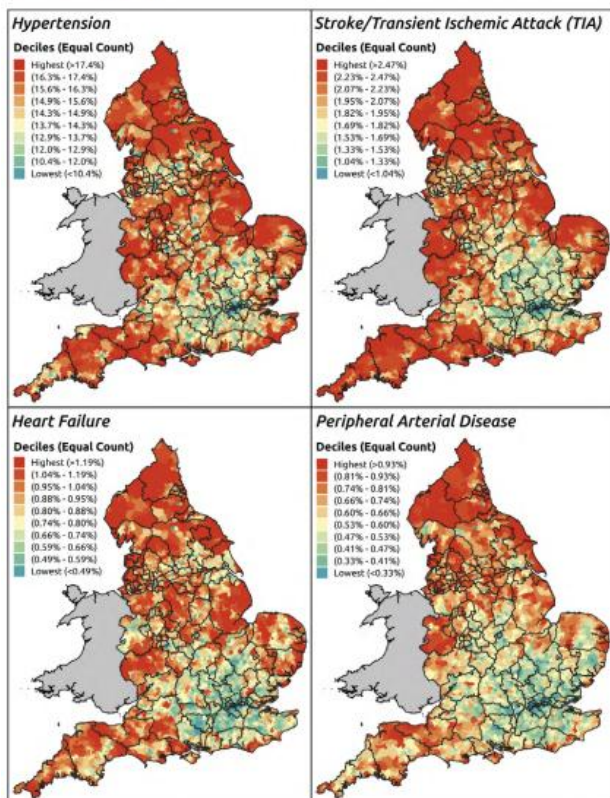
### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

Recent years have seen an increase in the use of private health care. Again, those wanting to use such facilities need to travel. For example, in the South West BUPA<sup>81</sup> offers health care facilities only in Exeter and Bristol. There are no private hospitals in the areas north of Exeter served by the railway line to Barnstaple.

This place-based hierarchy of hospitals means that some patients and their visiting relatives and friends from the area covered by the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line need to travel to Exeter, and in some cases beyond, for consultations and treatment. For those needing or wanting to use public transport, that involves at least one bus journey and a train journey.

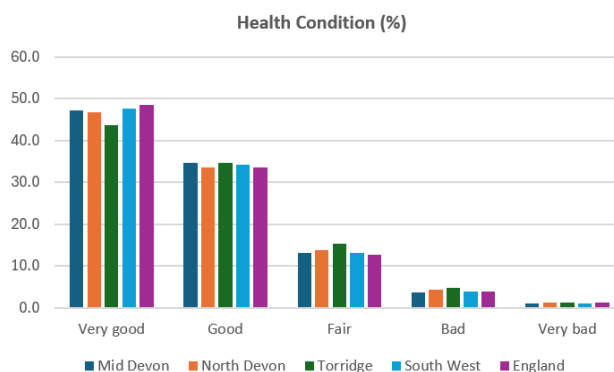
A government health report<sup>82</sup> highlights that coastal communities have particularly poor health outcomes, strongly correlated both with deprivation and ageing populations.

**Figure 2: Crude GP QOF prevalence of hypertension & selected CVDs; LSOAs 2014/15 – 2018/19**



The adjacent maps from the report highlight four key health conditions. While the headlines from the report focus on coastal areas, none of the areas covered by the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line register positively on any of the measures shown in the maps.

A key conclusion is that the areas covered by the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line both have a greater need for health care intervention because of overall higher levels of poor health while also having an overall greater need to travel for health care.



That conclusion is corroborated by the adjacent chart (source: chart by author using Nomis<sup>83</sup> analysis of the 2021 census figures), showing that North Devon and Mid Devon have a higher proportion of their populations with 'fair' or 'bad' health than either the South West or England more generally. There is also likely to be a correlation with the older age profile of people in that area shown in the charts earlier in this document.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.bupa.co.uk/>

<sup>82</sup> *The Chief Medical Officer's Report 2021 – Health in Coastal Communities.*

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

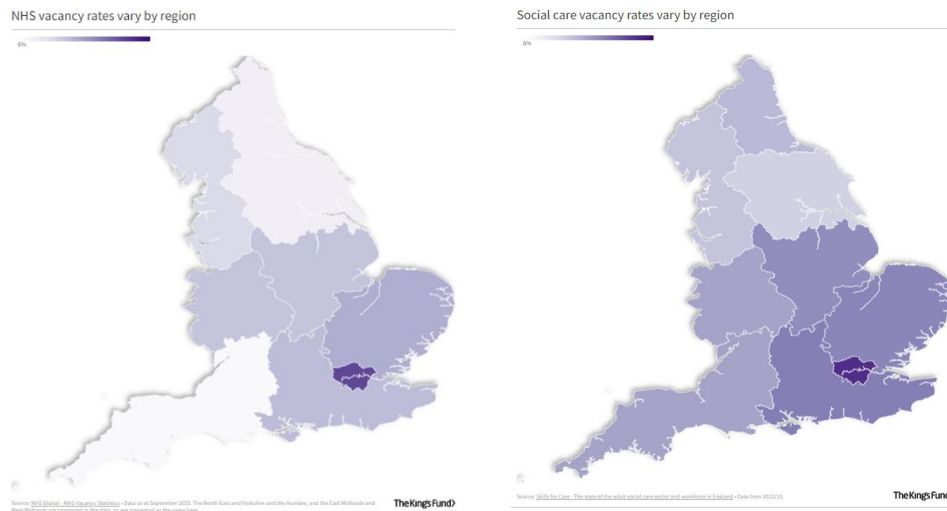
## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

Research undertaken on behalf of the Devon & Cornwall Community Rail Partnership at Crediton in September 2024 shared with the author shows that 2% of the passengers at Crediton who were interviewed were travelling in connection with medical treatment.

Difficulties in recruiting and retaining medical and social care staff have been reported<sup>84</sup>. While one of the less badly affected regions nationally, these shortages also affect the South West. The King's Fund report highlights that the South West has a vacancy rate of 6.2% compared to the national rate of 8.4%. Shortages are greater in the social care sector.

The King's Fund also explains that: "There are also variations within regions, with particular difficulties in recruitment into coastal and more deprived, for example." Better accessibility by public transport could help address this issue.



*Objective 6) Improve visitor access by sustainable public transport to the natural environment, including the Tarka Trail, the South West Coast Path, the Two Moors Way, the Exmoor National Park, the North Devon National Landscape, the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere and other coastal areas*

As the NOMIS figures shown under Objective 4) show, tourism is an important part of the Northern Devon economy and a key employer. In contrast, Mid Devon is the least visited part of Devon, with tourism supporting around 5% of employment<sup>85</sup>.

The *North Devon and Torridge Local Plan 2011-2031*<sup>86</sup> emphasises both the importance of the tourism sector economically and that sustainability is a key objective: "In order to achieve the objective of sustainable tourism, the area's tourism "offer" must be enhanced. Sustainable tourism development in Northern Devon will be focused on qualitative improvements, which could include expansion of existing facilities. Delivery of a quality product, not only through environmental safeguards but also through improved standards in the quality and range of accommodation and attractions, is an important element in achieving sustainable development. A quality rather than quantity approach is required if the sector is to keep pace with continually evolving requirements and expectations. Proposals that result in the enhancement of existing attractions and destinations will be supported." The same basic messages are contained in the *Northern Devon Tourism Strategy 2018 – 2022*<sup>87</sup>, published jointly by Torridge District Council and North Devon District Council.

The *A Destination Management Plan for Mid Devon* explains that Mid Devon District Council's aim is to "to build a competitive and sustainable tourism industry for Mid Devon, which increases the contribution tourism makes to our local economy over the next 5 years." The *Destination Management Plan* concludes that: "Mid Devon is the least visited district in Devon, indicating there is plenty of room for growth."

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/insight-and-analysis/data-and-charts/staff-shortages#vacancies-by-region>

<sup>85</sup> *A Destination Management Plan for Mid Devon*, Mid Devon District Council.

<sup>86</sup> <https://consult.torridge.gov.uk/kse/event/33615/section/ID-5051374-3>

<sup>87</sup> <https://democracy.torridge.gov.uk/documents/s10140/Northern%20Devon%20Tourism%20Strategy%20FINAL.pdf>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

Figures on expenditure per visitor (*England domestic overnight trips and day visits: subnational data*<sup>88</sup> - three years 2017-2019) published by VisitBritain show that visitors of all sorts to North Devon spent on average spent £61.26 per visit, with the equivalent figures for Torridge and Mid Devon being £54.74 and £32.72 respectively. Devon as a whole was £50.59. The North Devon and Torridge figures compare well with most other parts of England, but are lower than Cornwall & the Isles of Scilly (£71.85). As well as being less visited, Mid Devon has substantially lower per visitor spend compared to the other areas.

The same statistical source also shows that visitors travelling by train in day trips on average spent considerably more (£50.86) than those travelling by car (£33.25). This suggests that making train services more attractive through modernisation would help drive achievement of the aim set out in the *Northern Devon Tourism Strategy 2018 – 2022* of “growing the value of the visitor economy” and Mid Devon’s aim of attracting growth.



Image: Tarka Trail website

The Tarka Trail<sup>89</sup> is a 163 miles/261 km recreational route in many places following former railway lines. In places it also shares the route of the South West Coastal Path. The southern section through Bideford is marketed by both VisitDevon and on the Tarka Trail’s own website as being particularly suitable for cyclists.

Both the VisitDevon and the Tarka Trail websites<sup>90</sup> major on Barnstaple as the key centre of the route: “The entire route is centred around the town of Barnstaple the largest town in the region and takes in areas of Exmoor, the Valley of the Rocks and the coastline. ... You can pick up the route at various points across the county, the Trail passes through the towns of Lynmouth, Barnstaple, Bideford, Torrington, Okehampton and Ilfracombe and parts of it coincide with the South West Coast Path, the Two Moors Way and the Dartmoor Way, giving you plenty of chances to explore.”

While motorists have a wider choice of starting points, for those who have to or want to travel by public transport, Barnstaple is the obvious starting point as the end of the railway line from Exeter. The map shows that the train between Eggesford and Barnstaple is already considered to be an integral part of the Trail. A reinstated train service to Bideford could encourage more use of the Tarka trail from Bideford as a centre. Unlike buses, trains can carry bikes, enabling a single trip between Bideford and Barnstaple: while 19½ miles is not far for experienced cyclists, it is too far for many families with children or less experienced cyclists.

The South West Coast Path is one of Britain’s most popular long-distance footpaths. Improved train services would enable walkers from outside the Northern Devon area to access the path more easily by public transport, encouraging more use overall and transfer to more sustainable modes of transport.

The Wikipedia article on the coast path cites research showing significant economic and employment benefit accruing to the South West overall from the path: “In the 1990s it was thought that the path brought £150 million into the area each year, but new research in 2003 indicated that it generated around £300 million a year in total, which could support more than 7,500 jobs.<sup>91</sup> This research also recorded that 27.6% of visitors to the region came because of the Path, and they spent £136 million in a year. Local people took 23 million walks on the Path and spent a further £116 million, and other visitors contributed the remainder. A further study in 2005 estimated this figure to have risen to around £300 million.<sup>92</sup> Following investment through the Rural Development Programme for England, more detailed research was undertaken in 2012, and this found the annual spend by walkers to have risen to £439 million which sustains 9771 full-time equivalent jobs.”

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.visitbritain.org/research-insights/england-domestic-overnight-trips-and-day-visits-subnational-data>

<sup>89</sup> <https://www.visitdevon.co.uk/northdevon/explore/tarka-trail/>

<sup>90</sup> <https://tarkatrail.org.uk/>

<sup>91</sup> “Unlocking our Coastal Heritage - Economic growth”. *southwestcoastpath.org.uk*. Archived from the original on 4 March 2016.

<sup>92</sup> “Unlocking our Coastal Heritage - Economic growth”. *southwestcoastpath.org.uk*. Archived from the original on 4 March 2016.

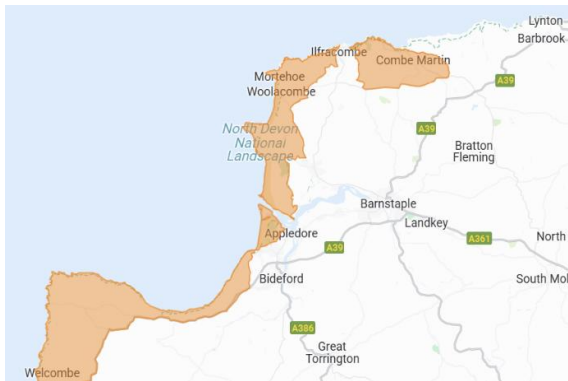
## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

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The Two Moors Way<sup>93</sup>, a 116-mile coast-to-coast walk encompassing both Dartmoor and Exmoor crosses the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line at Morchard Road station, which is highlighted as being a particularly convenient access point approximately half-way along the trail.

A study<sup>94</sup> published by the two national parks authorities in 2015 (*Economic Prospectus: Dartmoor and Exmoor National Parks*) into the economic development status of the Dartmoor and Exmoor national parks highlights the positive local economic development contribution that sustainable tourism such as that enabled by the Two Moors Way brings to the area: “On Dartmoor and Exmoor tourism contributes over £237m to the economy and is responsible for 4,473 FTE jobs, helping to keep rural services viable.”

Lynton/Lynmouth and other parts of western Exmoor are connected to the Exeter to Barnstaple railway line by the 310 bus service. Following a recent upgrade to this service by Devon County Council, it now runs hourly and all buses depart from and end at Barnstaple railway station, enabling easier intermodal journeys.



As can be seen on the adjacent map (National Landscapes Association<sup>95</sup>), in recognition of its natural beauty, much of the coastline in North Devon and Torridge, including many areas popular with tourists and holiday makers, is covered by the the North Devon National Landscape.

Until November 2023, when the official designation changed, this was known as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The UNESCO North Devon Biosphere was established in 1976. The Biosphere’s own website<sup>96</sup> describes it thus: “A UNESCO biosphere reserve is a place where people share a way of living with nature. The North Devon UNESCO Biosphere works to promote innovative approaches to economic development that are socially and culturally appropriate and environmentally sustainable.” The Biosphere incorporates three bodies promoting its aims: the Biosphere Partnership brings together stakeholders, a commercial arm (North Devon Biosphere Enterprises), and a charitable organisation the North Devon Biosphere Foundation.

The Biosphere comprises three zones (map: North Devon Biosphere website):



- A Core Area of Braunton Burrows for which the Biosphere’s vision is for: “Braunton Burrows and its part of the estuary to be managed and maintained as a world-class exemplary mix of dynamic coastal habitat features”;
- A Buffer Zone of the Taw Torridge Estuary as far as Barnstaple and Bideford, for which the vision is: “careful management of natural and cultural resources that ensures that communities can enjoy access to the natural environment and a cultural landscape maintained by local people”; and
- A Transition Zone comprising the catchment area of the water courses draining to the North Coast of Devon. The vision is: “for the area to be one where the

community thrives through effective participation in developing sustainable lifestyles that are reflected in the enhancement of the environment in which they live and work.”

<sup>93</sup> [twomoorsway.org/](http://twomoorsway.org/)

<sup>94</sup> [https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0033/76749/2015-09-18-Prospectus-Final-Full-version.pdf](https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0033/76749/2015-09-18-Prospectus-Final-Full-version.pdf)

<sup>95</sup> <https://national-landscapes.org.uk/national-landscapes>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.northdevonbiosphere.org.uk/biosphere-map.html>

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It is noted that the Transition Zone extends as far as the Copplestone area and also includes most of the Okehampton line, where substantial rail upgrade works have already been undertaken and continue in the form of the construction of the new Okehampton Interchange station. None of the works discussed in this document impinge on the Core or Buffer Zones.

#### Current Public Transport Services

##### *Current pattern of train services*

There is a regular passenger train service between Exeter and Barnstaple (full timetable in Annex B) running hourly seven days a week, with a few trains extending to other destinations beyond Exeter.

The train service has seen a number of improvements over recent years, including increases in frequency to an hourly service, the removal of older, less comfortable ‘Pacer’ trains, Sunday services increased to hourly from two-hourly in December 2019 and the introduction of longer, higher capacity three-car Class 158 and 165 trains following the extension of a number of shorter platforms.

In November 2021, services on the southern end of the line between Crediton and Exeter increased when Okehampton to Exeter services were reintroduced. Initially two-hourly, Okehampton train services became hourly in May 2022, resulting in a two-trains per hour train service between Crediton and Exeter.

**Devon's 'rail-mindedness' in 2022-23 - station footfall per head of local authority population**

District/Unitary	Stations	Usage 4/22-03/23	Pop'n 2021	Usage per head
Exeter	9	7,203,046	130,709	55.1
Teignbridge	5	2,697,484	134,803	20
East Devon	9	1,937,720	150,828	12.8
Torbay Unitary	3	1,423,692	139,324	10.2
Mid-Devon	8	780,952	82,852	9.4
Plymouth Unitary	6	2,381,158	264,729	9
South Hams	2	788,294	88,627	8.9
North Devon	5	587,748	98,611	6
West Devon	3	270,620	57,096	4.7
Torrige	0	0	68,114	0
<b>Totals / Average</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>18,070,714</b>	<b>1,215,693</b>	<b>14.9</b>

In spite of the strong growth in usage on the line (see Objective 2) above), usage of rail per head of population remains lower than for many other parts of Devon. Railfuture has published the adjacent ‘rail-mindedness’ table based on Office of Rail & Road figures showing rail trips per head of population.

Station Usage estimates from Office of Rail & Road      Population data from Office of National Statistics

##### *Train service journey times*

Some of the discrepancies in rail usage across different parts of Devon may be explained by inherent geographical or social factors<sup>97</sup> and the fact that some urban areas in Northern Devon such as Bideford and Ilfracombe have no railway stations and that many rural areas are very far from a railway station. Nevertheless, some of the discrepancy is also likely to reflect the fact that journey times between Barnstaple and other stations on the route and Exeter are both long in absolute terms and long for the distance involved.

Exeter St Davids to Barnstaple is 39¼ miles by rail, with just under a mile to Exeter Central. A typical journey time is 1 hour 6 minutes (36 mph). Some trains, in particular at peak hours, stop at more stations and are therefore slower, with the slowest train taking 1 hour 20 minutes, meaning an average speed of just 29 mph. However, the fastest train service, an early Saturday morning Barnstaple to Exeter journey as a return of the Fridays-only late night service from Exeter, covers that distance in 54 minutes (average speed 44 mph). Not only does this train only stop at two stations, but the key factor in its journey time is the fact that there are no trains in the opposite direction to be passed en route. The timetable shows that many daytime trains have to wait several minutes at both Crediton and Eggesford passing places. This means that the slowest journey time is 23% slower than the typical journey time and 31% slower than the very best journey time.

A significant proportion of passengers use Exeter Central station conveniently located in the city centre and most trains also serve that station, with the journey taking as little as 4 minutes. However, pathing constraints on the busy railway between Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central mean that there is wide variation in journey times<sup>98</sup>.

<sup>97</sup> For example, locations much closer to Exeter in distance and journey time may have an inherent tendency to feel the gravitational pull of a centre like Exeter more strongly.

<sup>98</sup> Some trains run in as little as 4 minutes between Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central, while pathing constraints mean some take a little longer at 6, 7 or 8 minutes, with a few taking longer still. A few early trains to Barnstaple and a few late trains from Barnstaple start or terminate at Exeter St Davids.

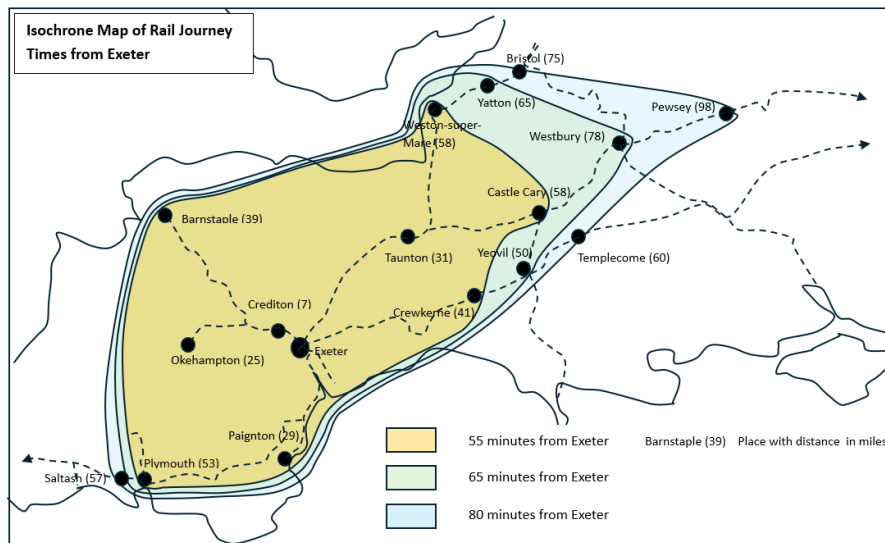
# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

The difference in journey times between Barnstaple and Exeter is accounted for by the fact that nearly all of the route is nowadays single track<sup>99</sup> and it is therefore only possible to run a frequent service on the line if trains cross at the intermediate passing places at Eggesford and Crediton. The fastest services run when they do not have to pass any trains in the opposite direction and only call at two intermediate stations. Nevertheless, the overall journey time is still extended by the fact that the maximum permitted track speed is only between 40 and 60 mph<sup>100</sup> over long sections of route with some lower speed sections and a short section where 70 mph is permitted<sup>101</sup>.

Observation using a mobile phone-based speed app suggests that maximum permitted speeds are not in practice reached on a number of sections of track. A number of locations also have old-fashioned, slow signalling and level crossing control procedures.

Compared to more modern trains, the classes of train currently used on the route have lower levels of acceleration. The much higher acceleration of modern electrically-powered or alternative fuel trains could be an important factor in reducing journey times<sup>102</sup> and/or allowing some 'buffer' in route timings to help address operational performance issues.



One way of illustrating the discrepancy between physical distance and journey times is an isochrone ('same time') map. The adjacent map (author) illustrates how far it is possible to travel by train from Exeter in 54 minutes, 65 minutes and 80 minutes, respectively the fastest, typical and slowest journey times between Exeter and Barnstaple. The figures next to place names are the distances in miles by

rail from Exeter St Davids.

Another point which emerges from the isochrone map is that journey times within Devon are generally slower than further east, reflecting in particular the difficult geography of the line south of Dartmoor to Plymouth and resulting slower train speeds. However, the socio-economic impacts of those higher journey times are less than for Northern Devon, as both Torbay and Plymouth are large, more self-contained conurbations. Many of the things that people in Northern Devon need to travel as far as Exeter for can be found more locally in those places.

<sup>99</sup> Parts of the route had originally been double track including multiple tracks and platforms at Barnstaple and all stations on single track sections had a passing place, but British rail singled these double-track sections with the sole exception of passing places at Crediton and Eggesford. While two tracks continue to exist on the section between Crediton and the former Coleford Junction north of Yeoford, they are two single bidirectional tracks, only usable by trains on the Okehampton and Barnstaple lines respectively.

<sup>100</sup> Route information is taken from the Network Rail *Western Route Sectional Appendix*, December 2023. The higher permitted speed for passenger diesel multiple units is quoted. The *Western Route Sectional Appendix* does not explain why track speeds are as they are, but a combination of unusually numerous private occupation/footpath crossings, track geometry on the frequent curves, track/bridge/other infrastructure condition are likely to be key factors.

<sup>101</sup> The Class 158 and 166 diesel multiple unit trains normally used on the route are capable of 90 mph and the Class 150 trains used on Okehampton services are capable of 75 mph, so journey times are constrained by the infrastructure, not the maximum speed of the trains used. Modern equivalent trains are all capable of at least 100 mph and have higher acceleration, which is also important in reducing journey times on routes with many stations and changes in maximum speeds.

<sup>102</sup> For example, the material journey time reductions achieved through the electrification of the Great Western Main were the result of the much higher acceleration rates of the Class 800/802 Intercity Express trains that replaced the old diesel High Speed Trains, not higher maximum speeds.

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

#### *Train service frequency*

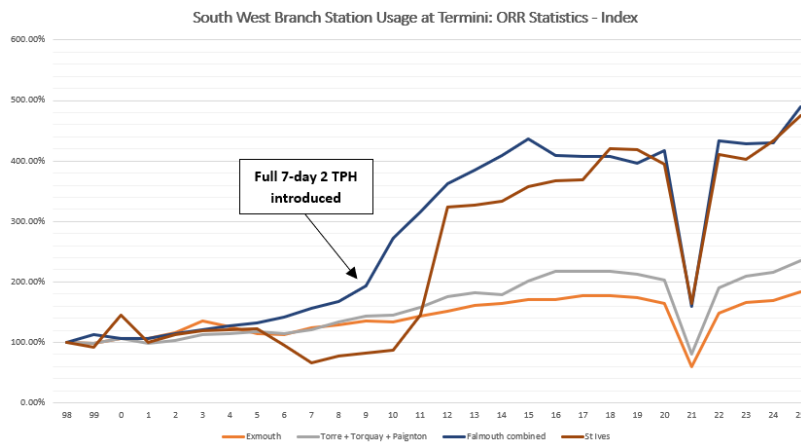
It might be inferred from the analysis above that the most important factor is the shortest possible train journey time. However, that would ignore the fact that train service frequency is also an important factor in driving increased passenger usage. The rail economic forecasting models such as Moira used by the rail industry and by professional transport consultants show that rail demand has strong general elasticity in relation to improved frequency: higher train service frequencies correlate with greater levels of passenger usage.

The usage charts above show a particularly high level of growth at Crediton from 2021. This suggests a strong correlation with the increased frequency of train services following the reinstatement of train services to Okehampton in November 2021. Initially two-hourly, frequency on the Okehampton line increased to hourly in May 2022, leading to the train service between Crediton and Exeter increasing from hourly prior to November 2021 to two trains per hour from May 2022.

Research undertaken on behalf of the Devon & Cornwall Community Rail Partnership (DCCRP) at Crediton in September 2024 shared with the author shows that, of the passengers who had started travelling by train from Crediton since the increase in frequency of train services, 19% had previously driven or been a car passenger. 28% of passengers had started using the train from Crediton within the last three years (i.e. following the increase in train service frequency). 15% had been using the station for a year or less. This suggests the frequency increase has encouraged substantial new usage, not just increased usage among existing passengers, and also modal change from car.

Although it is not possible to separate it as clearly from other drivers of increased usage as with the frequency increase at Crediton, in part because of the significant impact of the COVID pandemic, it appears very likely that the train service frequency increase following the introduction of additional Sunday services on the Barnstaple line in December 2019 has also increased patronage. Sunday is particularly important for leisure travellers. The DCCRP research showed that 42% of passengers at Crediton were leisure travellers, with another 19% visiting friends or family.

Similar trends are observable in passenger usage of other lines in the South West of England which have seen increases in usage from hourly to a full two trains per hour service seven days a week [‘2 TPH’] (author, using ORR station usage figures):



The clearest example is Falmouth, which saw an increase from an hourly train service to a 7-day half-hourly service in May 2009 following construction of a new passing loop at Penryn to allow trains to pass each other.

The other routes have more complex histories of train service improvement, with no single step changes in provision like Falmouth. This has led to less dramatic, but still very significant changes in usage, only appearing lower

because of the enormous % increases on the Falmouth and St Ives lines:

- Exmouth has long had a 2 TPH Monday to Saturday service and has had various minor enhancements over the years, with year-round doubling of the Sunday service to 2 TPH introduced in May 2016. In December 2019 the route was connected to the service between Exeter and Paignton, providing an increase in through journey opportunities;
- The Paignton line traditionally had an hourly local service from Exeter, supplemented by long-distance services to London and the North of England. Additional EU-funded local services started in December 2013 leading to a largely 2 TPH local train service timetable, with full 7-day 2 TPH local service operation starting in December 2019 as part of the wider GWR timetable changes. It should also be noted that the

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

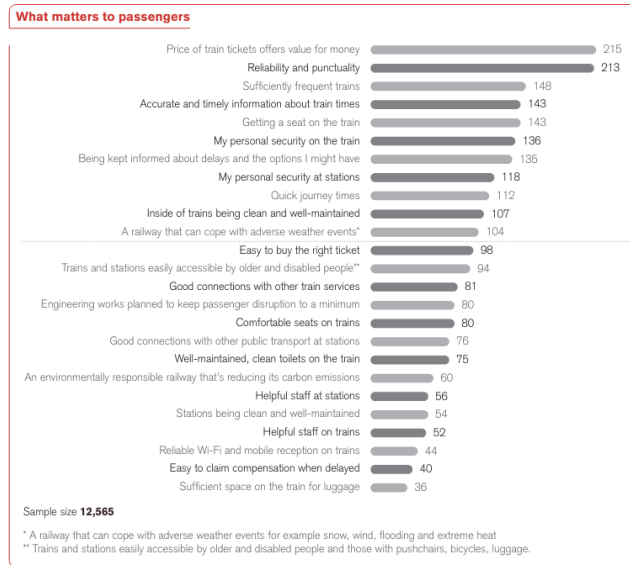
## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

figures in the chart only show the station usage on the ‘branch’ from Newton Abbot, whereas the trains also serve the local stations between Exeter and Newton Abbot; and

- The St Ives line saw significant cuts to winter train services in 2006. These were later reinstated and thereafter there was continued improvement to train services, including the introduction of winter Sunday services and the later introduction of a full 7-day 2 TPH timetable from 2016. The large new Park & Ride facility at St Erth opened in June 2019, replacing the much smaller Lelant Saltings facility. Lelant Saltings was reduced to a minimum service and Lelant station serving the Lelant village itself saw a significant increase in usage.

It should be noted that in all these cases, the 2 TPH timetables have been developed in such a way that they have equal or broadly equal departure intervals at both ends of the route rather than reflecting an approach taken on some main line railways of having one much faster and one slower train stopping at all stations per hour. This means that they are seen by passengers as genuinely having a broadly 30 minute interval service rather than 20/40 minute or similar intervals, where missing one train could lead to a much longer wait in one part of the hour than the other and/or a longer journey with more station stops.

With these branches and the Plymouth – Penzance main line now all having 2 TPH services, the Barnstaple line has become an outlier as a route serving larger urban areas in the South West not benefiting from the more frequent level of service. ‘Clock-face’ timetabling with the same pattern of easy-to-remember times past each hour has increasingly become the norm on railways and other transport modes such as buses across the world.



The importance of train service frequency for passengers can also be seen in the adjacent table of passengers’ priorities taken from Transport Focus research<sup>103</sup>. ‘Sufficiently frequent trains’ is third in priority order, topped only by ‘Reliability and punctuality’ and ‘Price of train tickets offers value for money’. ‘Quick journey times’ only comes ninth in order of priority.

The research is at a national level and it is possible that research into Barnstaple line passenger priorities could look different. In particular, as this document elsewhere argues, journey time is likely to be of great importance for passengers (and current non-users) on this route. Nevertheless, the research still underlines the importance of train service frequency.



Source: GWR fare data and rail timetables (rail), Stagecoach fare data and bus timetables (bus), TAG Databook (values of time)

Figure 19: Generalised cost by journey purpose for rail and bus Okehampton to Exeter

Although it covers a different type of scheme, the Department for Transport’s evaluation<sup>104</sup> of the Okehampton line reopening project contains the adjacent graphic comparing the generalised cost of time between rail and bus journeys. For the purpose of this section, the interesting point is how for rail travellers of all types, the ‘Service Frequency Penalty’ and ‘In-Vehicle Time’ (taking the former as a proxy for journey frequency and the latter as a proxy for journey time) components of the overall calculation are generally very similar. This reinforces the conclusion that the right balance is likely to be one of combining an increase in train frequency with a reduction in

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.transportfocus.org.uk/publication/britains-railway-what-matters-to-passengers/>

<sup>104</sup> *Dartmoor Line Early Impact Evaluation*, Department for Transport, March 2025: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d119dce65dc716bfb1dbbc/dartmoor-line-early-impact-evaluation.pdf>

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

journey time, rather than having one faster and one slower train service.

*Barnstaple railway line: Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats (SWOT) analysis*

The following diagram (author) sets out in summary form the SWOT strategic position of the Exeter to Barnstaple rail line as explored in various sections of this document:

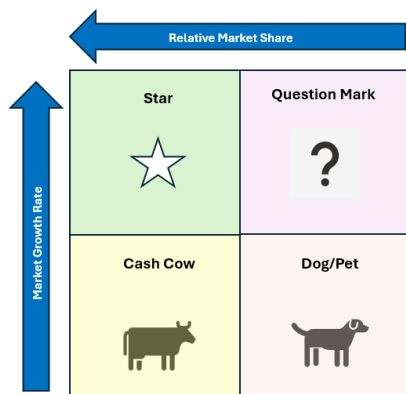
<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong, continuing, long-term growth, with usage well above pre-COVID levels: clear relevance of rail for the Northern/Mid Devon and Exeter areas</li> <li>• Strong usage growth at most intermediate stations as well as Barnstaple</li> <li>• Serves Exeter: a city with a strong rail market for its size, with several well-located stations</li> <li>• Stronger in growing markets such as leisure and education, with weaker markets such as white collar commuting less prominent</li> <li>• Recent improvements in train services: more Sunday services and longer trains</li> <li>• High levels of rail connectivity to other parts of the country at Exeter St Davids</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor operational performance</li> <li>• Slow journey times for the distance</li> <li>• Lower frequency than other lines to similar sized places in South West</li> <li>• Crowding trains dissuading would-be users</li> <li>• Perceived by many as not providing good connections to long-distance rail network</li> <li>• Poor accessibility of some intermediate stations for active travel and car</li> <li>• Extended journey times by connecting buses in spite of good physical integration</li> <li>• Poor mobile connectivity/wi-fi</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yet further usage growth from faster, more frequent, more punctual/reliable trains</li> <li>• Higher frequency/shorter journey times improve longer-distance connectivity and derived revenue</li> <li>• Better intermediate station accessibility/usability helps capture new markets</li> <li>• GBR restructuring facilitates schemes requiring coordination of activities and financing between TOCs and Network Rail</li> <li>• More devolution of decision-making and funding raises likelihood of funding for schemes such as Barnstaple with high socio-economic value</li> <li>• Better mobile connectivity/wi-fi encourages more use/attracts new users</li> <li>• Separate Bideford reopening brings new traffic</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unlikely to be seen as a rail enhancement priority nationally given the large numbers of strong competing schemes</li> <li>• Continued centralisation of decision-making and tight fiscal constraint lead to a continued second rank status for the route ('patch and repair')</li> <li>• Rail institutional structures continue to militate against a whole-route modernisation approach bringing together investment in route infrastructure, stations and trains</li> <li>• Route becomes a victim of its own success, with crowding dissuading users</li> <li>• Increased frequency of severe-weather related closures and performance issues</li> </ul>

It suggests that some of the line's weaknesses could become opportunities through well-targeted enhancement investment to address those weaknesses.

However, there is a risk that key threats mean such investment does not materialise, resulting in a continuation of the 'managed decline', 'patch and repair' approach seen over many decades.

Equally, there may be opportunities. In particular, the Government is indicating that greater devolution of capital investment funding is likely. The English Devolution White Paper was published on 16 December 2024<sup>105</sup>. The restructuring of Britain's railways with the creation of Great British Railways may

make schemes involving the complex coordination of funding of both train operators and Network Rail easier by creating a single railway authority.



A different mode of strategic analysis is the growth-share matrix, originally developed by the Boston Consulting Group, as shown in the adjacent diagram (author). The focus on market share and growth is intended to highlight future potential rather than simply current strengths and weaknesses.

The Exeter to Barnstaple route fits the 'Question Mark' category best: high, sustained growth, but lower market share. The usual advice for this sector is that it is one for investment or development, depending on the probability of it becoming a Star. The usage figures elsewhere in this document show the Barnstaple route experiencing strong continuing growth in passenger numbers while most other routes in the country have seen declines in usage post-COVID. The Barnstaple

route does appear to be a potential Star if investment resolves the issues holding it back, in particular in comparison with car travel. Social value, in particular the potential to reduce the impacts of peripherality, would be part of the analysis as well as ticket fare income.

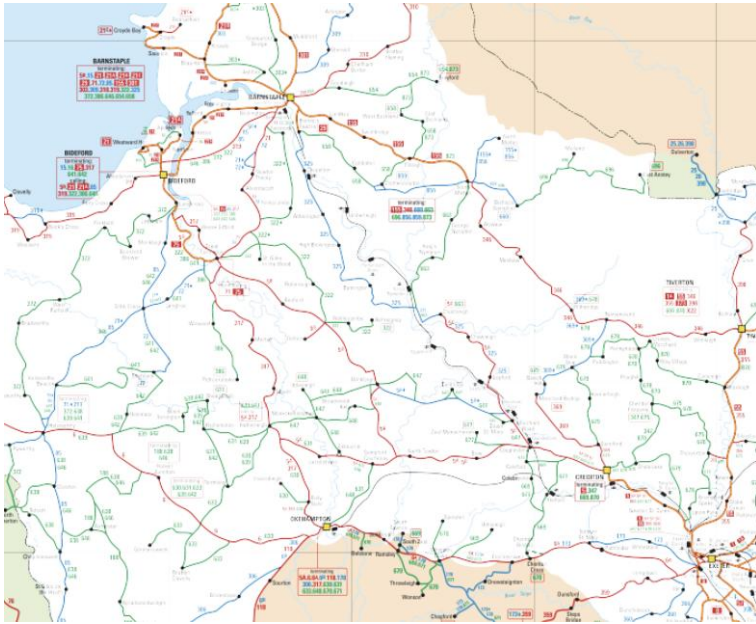
### Bus services

The map on the following page shows bus services in the Mid Devon, North Devon and Torridge areas served by the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route (graphic: Devon County Council):

<sup>105</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE



A limited Monday to Saturday-only, bus service operated by Stagecoach (route 5B) runs between Barnstaple and Exeter via Bideford and Great Torrington (timetable in Annex C). It is registered by Stagecoach as three separate legs, albeit operated by the same vehicle with through fares and passengers able to remain on board. Nevertheless, the slow journey times (two hours 25 minutes between Barnstaple and Exeter), the limited number of journeys (gaps of 2 to 3 hours or more) and lack of Sunday services make it far less attractive than the alternatives for through Barnstaple to Exeter journeys for anyone other than the most price-conscious traveller.

Bideford, Branton, Great Torrington, Ilfracombe, Lynton and Westward Ho! have bus services which also serve Barnstaple station<sup>106</sup>.

Bideford and Great Torrington are also connected to Exeter by the same route 5B bus service that serves Barnstaple, but the 15/20-minute weekday service between Bideford and Barnstaple rail service in practice makes that a far more attractive choice for many and the only Sunday one.

With the exception of Crediton, the intermediate railway stations either have no bus services or limited bus services. Even though passenger numbers are lower than at Barnstaple or Crediton, the lack or paucity of alternatives means that the regular train service calls at most of the smaller stations are of particular importance to local users.

#### *Long-distance coach services*

National Express operates a long-distance coach service between Barnstaple and London. The service starts in Bideford and calls include South Molton, Tiverton, Wellington, Taunton, Weston-super-Mare, Heathrow Airport and London. It also calls at Yelland, Fremington and Bickington on the outskirts of Barnstaple. All seats must be booked in advance. Three services a day depart from Barnstaple at 0600, 0840 and 1130, with returns from London arriving at 1620, 1855 and 2225<sup>107</sup>. A typical journey time to London is 6 hours 30 minutes. It is theoretically possible to travel to Exeter by changing at Taunton, but only the 0840 departure connects and, with an overall journey time of 4 hours 20 minutes, it is not a practical option.

#### *Air transport*

There is no airport in Northern Devon, but Exeter Airport located to the east of the city can be accessed by Stagecoach bus from Exeter St Davids station. Flights are offered to a range of UK and European destinations. For a wider range of destinations, including long-haul world-wide, it is necessary to travel to Heathrow Airport in west London. All the terminals of that airport can be accessed by rail, changing in London Paddington station (the faster Heathrow Express services or the Elizabeth Line), which would entail two changes of train from Northern Devon. The National Express coach service also calls at Heathrow.

#### *Car Journeys between Barnstaple and Exeter*

There are two main route options for car or other motorised road vehicle journeys between Barnstaple and Exeter<sup>108</sup>:

- The direct A337 road via Crediton: 41.7 miles, 70 minutes; or

<sup>106</sup> Compared to many places in Britain, the railway station at Barnstaple offers a good standard of physical integration between bus and train services, with the bus stops immediately outside the station in a dedicated area, with shelters and digital next bus passenger information screens. There are plans for a further upgrade to the facilities.

<sup>107</sup> There are some minor variations in timings depending on the day of the week.

<sup>108</sup> ViaMichelin website: <https://www.viamichelin.co.uk/routes>

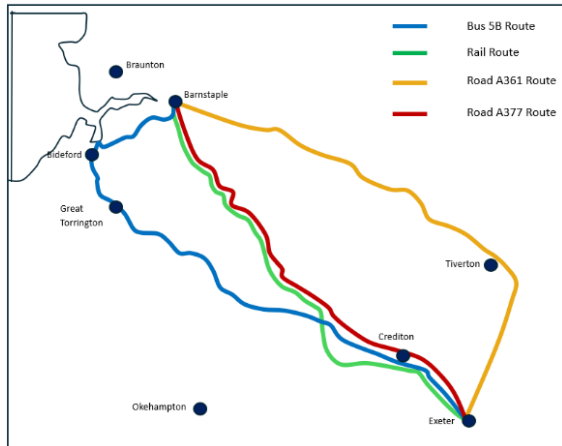
## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

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- Using the A361 'North Devon Link Road' via Tiverton: 45.3 miles 73 minutes.

The road congestion, in particular in Exeter, highlighted earlier in this document means that many drivers are likely in practice to allow considerably longer, in particular for the outward journey if they have a timed appointment to make. While the direct route via Crediton appears to be slightly quicker, on journey planners many in practice use the A361 North Devon Link Road alternative, as it is constructed to more modern standards partly on an old railway alignment avoiding intermediate towns and villages where road works and other events can disrupt journeys. Drivers wishing to travel further east are almost always likely to travel on the A361 and then join the M5 motorway. That also allows access to Tiverton Parkway railway station, which is considered by many a convenient way of making journeys to London and other locations to the east by rail.

#### Comparison of rail, bus and road journeys



The adjacent sketch map (author) shows the different routes between Barnstaple and Exeter.

The rail route and the A377, largely following river valleys, have the edge in terms of distance, while the direct bus route and the preferred more reliable road link via the A361 North Devon Link Road and Tiverton both have longer, much less direct routes.

In principle, that could give rail a strong journey time advantage. However, as the following table (author) shows, that is not currently the case and the longest rail journey times are less competitive with road:

Mode	Journey Time	Distance
Train	54 minutes (fastest) 66 minutes (typical) 80 minutes (slowest)	39 miles
Bus	145 minutes	53 miles
Car A377	70 minutes	41 miles
Car A361	73 minutes	45 miles

However, this table does not show fully journey times on a fully comparable basis, since most people in the Northern Devon area do not live immediately in the vicinity of Barnstaple railway station. Fully comparable journey times would need to take account of the need to access Barnstaple station by foot, bike, bus or car.

The strong growth seen in rail demand to/from Barnstaple as discussed earlier in this document suggests that rail is seen positively by many travellers, but the time lost through the intermodal interchange element of many journeys means that rail needs to reduce its typical and longest journey times if it is to gain a competitive advantage over car. That is particularly true for connecting rail journeys to London and other longer-distance destinations to the east and north because of the possibility for many passengers with access to a car of joining the rail network at Tiverton Parkway station. The connections at Exeter St Davids station to and from the key London services are either rather tight or rather long. In particular when combined with today's poor operational performance, tight connections encourage passengers to travel on an earlier train, extending the journey time by an hour, while long connections mean that the overall journey time is seen as less attractive.

A further factor is predictability of journey time. The significant road congestion experienced in the Exeter urban area means that is already a factor for car-borne journeys. However, as seen earlier in this document, rail currently also suffers from poor performance. As well as extending actual journey times, a reputation for poor performance leads passengers to make arrangements to ensure they arrive on time which extend overall journey times.

In spite of the good physical interchange facilities at Barnstaple railway station, there is a significant interchange time penalty for most journeys combining bus and rail on today's timetables. Part of the reason is that most of the bus timetables have not been designed for optimal intermodal interchange with rail, with some being rather tight and others long. Even though bus is important as an access mode to Barnstaple station,

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

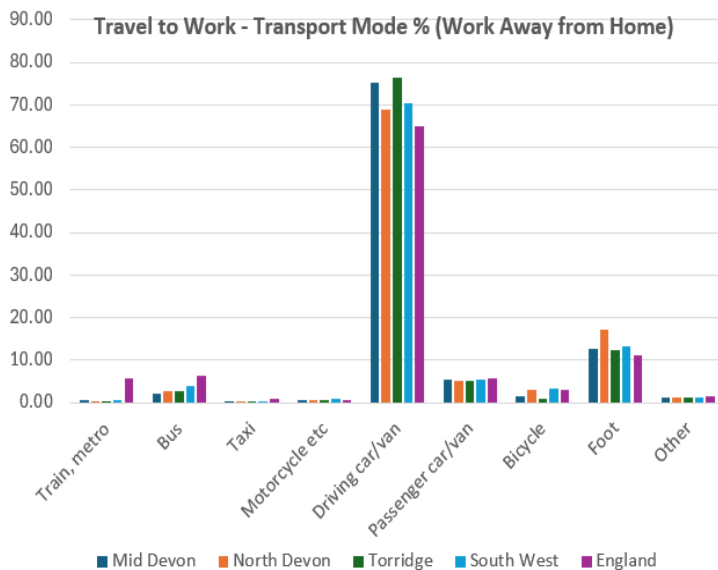
### PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

that is not its principal market, so it is difficult to see that structuring bus timetables around the rail would in practice be achievable.

However, the sometimes tight connections, road congestion and other factors affecting bus operational performance also mean that many travelling to Exeter on bus-rail journeys via Barnstaple station are likely to decide to travel earlier than theoretically necessary in order to ensure they do not miss the train service to Exeter. With an hourly train service, a very long delay would ensue if a train is missed at Barnstaple. Predictability of arrival time on the outward journey is particularly important, as for many people being late for work or a class or a meeting or a hospital appointment is worse than being late in their own time. The result is an extended journey time which is not only less competitive with car, but also likely to act to disincentivise travel.

Bus is completely uncompetitive with car or rail journey times between Barnstaple and Exeter. However, the 5B route serves many other places en route and it is not obvious that through Barnstaple to Exeter journeys are really the target market except for very cost-conscious<sup>109</sup> passengers. Likewise, the National Express coach service targets a different market: longer-distance journeys for the price-conscious, locations such as Bideford and South Molton with no rail services and direct journeys for those with heavy luggage to Heathrow Airport.

Moreover, even if journey times for bus journeys were more competitive with car, car users have a low propensity to travel by bus. The Competition Commission’s report into the bus market<sup>110</sup> includes a review of whether car should be included within the scope of the report as part of the overall market and concludes that car users generally show a low propensity to switch to bus: “the propensity of individuals to use the bus rather than other methods of travel is driven by, for example, whether the individual has access to a car, their income, life stage, how close their home is to a bus stop and the frequency of bus services from that bus stop. While the propensity of individuals to use the bus is clearly important to local bus operators, many of these factors are outside of their control. As such, these aspects of customer behaviour do not act as a competitive constraint on the behaviour of bus operators.”



The adjacent chart (author using Nomis<sup>111</sup> 2021 Census data) shows that both bus and rail have a very small share of the local travel to work modes of transport for those who do not normally work at home within Mid Devon, North Devon and Torridge.

Compared to the South West and England as a whole, for local travel within the area, there is significantly greater reliance on cars and less active and public transport-based travel to work. Torridge and Mid Devon are notably more dependent on cars than North Devon, where there is greater use of active travel modes.

The very limited rail infrastructure within the Northern Devon and Mid Devon areas following the widespread British Rail closures means that the low share for rail of the overall travel to work market within that area is not surprising.

<sup>109</sup> In particular with the current Government-sponsored cap on bus fares of £3.00, less so at normal fares.

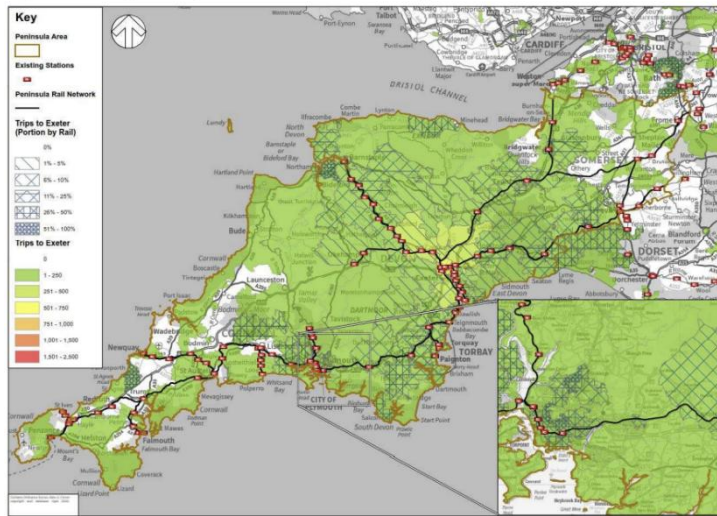
<sup>110</sup> *Local bus services market investigation - A report on the supply of local bus services in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland and London)*, 20 December 2011.

<sup>111</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

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Figure 3-9 - Origin of Trips to Exeter and Portion Using Rail

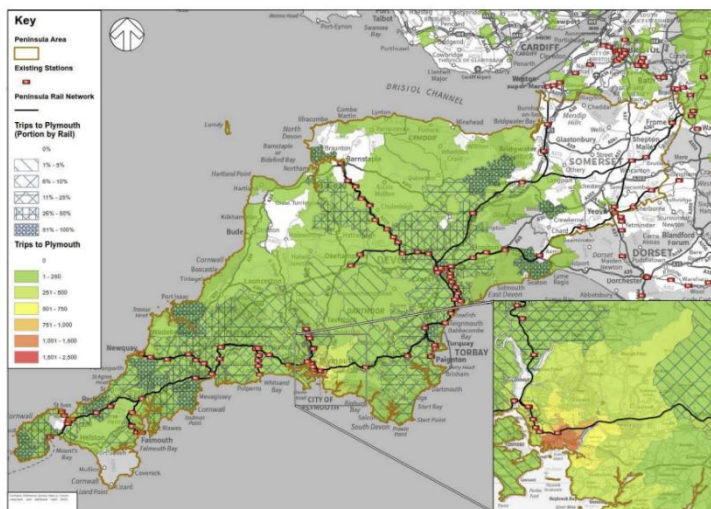


The picture is different for longer-distance journeys from Barnstaple and other stations on the Exeter to Barnstaple route. In these cases, rail has a much stronger position. In particular, rail has a strong market share for journeys to Exeter from the wider Barnstaple area and many of the intermediate stations. This is particularly clear from the adjacent graphic from the *Peninsula Rail Strategy*<sup>112</sup>, which shows a much higher market share for rail for trips to Exeter from Barnstaple than the average for all areas covered. As shown elsewhere in this document, the *Strategy* concludes that the position is only likely to have further strengthened since the 2011 on which it was based, given the wider

improvements to the Barnstaple train services.

The following graphic established on the same basis shows that rail also has a strong market position for trips to Plymouth, even though there are smaller numbers than for Exeter:

Figure 3-11 - Origin of Trips to Plymouth and Portion Using Rail



The *Strategy* does not contain a table on the same basis for trips to London or the rest of Britain, but the tables it does contain for trips to Somerset show far lower market shares for rail from Barnstaple and other stations on the Exeter to Barnstaple line. That would be consistent with the proposition elsewhere in this document that road is stronger in those markets, at least for the initial stage of the journey via Tiverton Parkway station given the slow journey times by rail via Exeter and risks of missing a connection.

### Emerging conclusions on train service improvements

Bringing all of the points relating to the structure of train services mentioned above together, it is hard to escape the conclusion that both reducing journey time and increasing effective frequency between Barnstaple and Exeter should be joint key aims. That would most directly improve rail's cross-modal competitive position on the Northern Devon to Exeter corridor and thereby do most to address the scheme objectives, in particular those relating to addressing peripherality, improving sustainability of connectivity and improving journey opportunities. The following points derived from the preceding analysis support this thesis, encompassing economic arguments, the demonstrated importance of frequency for passengers, the better marketability of easy-to-remember train service patterns, cross-modal and cross-regional comparisons, train service pattern issues, better train and bus connectivity at Exeter and Barnstaple, and performance and train service operability issues:

- **Economic arguments:**
  - Railway economic models show strong passenger response (elasticity of demand) to both shorter journey times and more frequent journey opportunities;

<sup>112</sup> *Peninsula Rail Strategy*, Peninsula Transport, July 2023.

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- In the generalised time calculations shown in the DfT Okehampton study<sup>113</sup>, the ‘Service Frequency Penalty’ and ‘In-Vehicle Time’ are broadly equivalent, supporting the thesis of the equivalent importance of journey time and train service frequency;
- Jointly, shorter journey times and more frequent train services could have the potential to drive significant increases in usage and therefore in ticket sales income and derived social benefit for the area served by the railway; and
- There are many examples in the South West of the significant levels of growth in usage that a 2 TPH even-interval service level can bring, with Falmouth following the installation of the new passing loop at Penryn, and Crediton following the reintroduction of train services to Okehampton being particularly stark examples of a step-change in passenger usage following a train service frequency increase.
- *The demonstrated importance of train service frequency for passengers:*
  - The importance of train service frequency for passengers can be seen in Transport Focus’s research on passenger priorities, with ‘Sufficiently frequent trains’ third in priority order, topped only by ‘Reliability and punctuality’ and ‘Price of train tickets offers value for money’; and
  - The complex structure of timetable in the Exeter area means that a non-even interval fast/stopper structure of service would result in the non-even interval of departures and arrivals being at the Barnstaple end of the route, making the discrepancy particularly noticeable to the key passenger market.
- *The improved marketability of easy-to-remember train service patterns:*
  - Easy-to-remember even-interval timetables have become increasingly adopted by transport systems across the world, which is highly relevant to a route essentially part of the developing ‘Exeter Metro’ concept.
- *Cross-modal and cross-regional comparisons:*
  - The Barnstaple line has become an outlier as a route serving a larger urban area in the South West not benefitting from a half-hourly service;
  - Exeter to Barnstaple train services are slow both in absolute terms (the slowest trains average just 29 mph and even the best once-weekly service averages only 43 mph) and in comparative terms for the distances involved compared to other parts of England;
  - Current journey times are very uneven:
    - A typical journey time is 1 hour 6 minutes (average 36 mph). The slowest trains take 1 hour 20 minutes, with an average speed of 29 mph. The fastest train service, a once-weekly early morning service to Exeter, covers that distance in just 54 minutes (average 44 mph); and
    - The slowest current journey time is 23% slower than the typical journey time and 31% slower than the very best journey time;
  - The longest journey times are for many of the most heavily used trains during the Monday to Friday peak hours, which need to stop at the most stations;
  - Although average journey speeds are relatively low in other parts of the South West, passengers from Barnstaple have unusually long journeys for many essential services found only in Exeter;
  - Improved journey times are needed, and are potentially achievable, in order to improve rail’s and competitive position compared to the car, including in relation to through journeys to other parts of Britain – car users have a low propensity to switch to bus; and
  - While many improvements have been made to the Exeter to Barnstaple timetable in recent years, the inherent inflexibility of the heavily rationalised infrastructure limits the extent of potential future improvements.
- *Train service pattern issues:*
  - Much of the improvement in journey times is likely to be achieved by the much greater acceleration of modern trains rather than from omitting station stops: given that there are more regular station stops south of Eggesford than north of it, the overall journey time saving from a limited-stop train compared to each train of a regular interval service may be less marked than might be assumed;

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<sup>113</sup> *Dartmoor Line Early Impact Evaluation*, Department for Transport, March 2025:  
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d119dce65dc716bfb1dbbc/dartmoor-line-early-impact-evaluation.pdf>

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- The 'even-interval' service is unlikely to be a completely regular service, as there will remain a need to provide a level of service at the very smallest stations such as Portsmouth Arms and Chapelton, in particular at peak hours and for weekend leisure travel;
- Both types of train service structure would enable intermediate stations with growing usage but with a less than hourly train service to benefit from more frequent train services; and
- The best train service pattern in overall usage and therefore in social and economic benefit terms is likely to be a pair of train services per hour with broadly similar journey times, each significantly faster than services today, resulting in an even interval of departure times at both ends of the route, rather than one faster service and another service stopping at more intermediate stations.
- *Better train and bus connectivity at Exeter and Barnstaple:*
  - Greater frequency with even interval departures from both ends of the route would help provide better connectivity and therefore demand:
    - To/from buses at Barnstaple: with buses working to even interval timetables, a non-even-interval structure of train arrivals/departures would militate against the best overall integrated public transport outcome; and
    - To/from longer-distance train services at Exeter including London and the Midlands/North of England: the higher fares for the longer-distance journeys means that increases in this market could bring significant additional contributory revenue to the railway.
- *Performance and train service operability:*
  - A more regular service structure is likely also to be the best performing service structure, as each of the pair of trains per hour in each direction would have similar patterns of arrival and departure at each end of the route and at passing places and would therefore ease the choices for the control centre at times of severe disruption: an overall more manageable structure of services;
  - The best operational performance would be necessary if the Barnstaple route is to become a successful enabler for the 4 TPH cross-Exeter 'Exeter Metro' concept;
  - An unequal interval timetable creates a risk of unequal loading and therefore crowding of the faster one of the pair of hour train services from Barnstaple which is and is likely to remain by far the largest single station in terms of usage; and
  - Unequal levels of usage from a differentiated service pattern would lead to overall lower level of effective capacity on the route and put the route into a weaker position for continued growth in usage over the longest term.

Developing a timetable proposition to give best effect to this vision that combines affordable and value for money interventions in the rail infrastructure with the best achievable journey times, including taking account of better operational characteristics of modern rolling stock, is a complex, iterative optimisation process best undertaken by the rail industry. Attempting that is therefore not the intention at this early stage when it remains unclear what options to upgrade the route might be feasible and fundable. As a result, it is not at this stage possible to state how much theoretical maximum journey time saving might be given up in favour of a more even service perceived by passengers to have a greater usable frequency.

It should be emphasised at this early stage of business case development that all conclusions on options to support the vision are necessarily provisional and are intended to give a starting point and direction for further analysis as the business case develops. They are subject to validation through operability studies and economic/engineering assessments of feasibility and value for money for of the costs involved.

#### Long List of Options

The following long list of options has been considered:

- 1) Further road improvements;
- 2) Bus-based improvements;
- 3) Active travel improvements;
- 4) Train service improvement options; and
- 5) Do-nothing (business as usual).

Further consideration is given to each of these options in turn below, followed by a comparative strategic assessment of the options based on the table recommended in the Department for Transport guidance<sup>114</sup>. The

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<sup>114</sup> Department for Transport, *Transport Business Cases: The Levelling Up Toolkit*, February 2022.

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options are not entirely mutually exclusive. It is noted that the most recent version of the HM Treasury *Green Book*<sup>115</sup> says that: “Options that do not deliver a proposal’s objectives cannot represent value for money.”

#### *Option 1): Further road improvements*

Large sums have been spent on the road network in North Devon and Mid Devon, including on the A39 and associated Torridge Bridge and on the A361 and associated Taw Bridge. The A361 North Devon Link Road was undergoing a further series of upgrades at the date this document was being prepared. Likewise, there have been many works to the road system in Exeter over the years.

Nevertheless, both Exeter and Barnstaple continue to suffer significant road traffic congestion. As shown elsewhere in this document, this congestion amongst some of the worst in the whole country. As a result, one of the key thrusts of the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>116</sup> (LTP) is to improve sustainable travel options rather than to attempt to build additional road capacity within a constrained environment: “The city of Exeter is built on an historic highway network that is constrained by limited road crossings of the River Exe. It is therefore not generally possible to build extra physical highway capacity within the city. Instead, the strategy for Exeter focuses on improving sustainable travel choices and making the city a more attractive place to live, work and visit.”

The geographically direct A377 road route suffers from numerous reasons for extended journeys. A key one is delays transiting Crediton. An earlier proposal for a Crediton road bypass was abandoned and the safeguarding of the proposed route alignment lifted, so no straightforward scheme exists to address that issue.

On these bases, no road-based alternatives are identified that would meet the scheme objectives, in particular given that the local, regional and national transport, levelling up and net zero strategies put considerable emphasis on the benefits of improving public transport and active travel provision. Nevertheless, within that wider picture, this document identifies some targeted local station and associated road improvements that would support the proposed improvements to the train service between Barnstaple and Exeter.

#### *Option 2): Bus-based improvements*

While there are probably many worthwhile local improvements that could be made, the overall current picture on bus provision, in particular on the Barnstaple to Bideford corridor is actually very positive, in particular in comparison with many other parts of the country. The 21/21A route runs at an unusually high frequency and is well used, with early and late services, and generous Sunday provision compared to many other parts of the country. There is good physical integration at Barnstaple and Crediton stations. Unlike in many parts of the country where local authority sponsorship of rural services has either stopped altogether or been severely reduced, Northern Devon and Mid Devon see a wide range of bus services to destinations not served by commercial bus services supported by Devon County Council.

Moreover, the Devon & Torbay LTP has already set out plans for further improvements to bus services in the Barnstaple area, some already under way, which it sees as being a key connector to the transport hub at Barnstaple rather than an alternative to the rail route:

- “We will make improvements at Barnstaple railway station. These will include access and forecourt changes to make it easier for people to change between bus and rail services”;
- “Funding has already been obtained from the Department for Transport’s Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme to accelerate the roll out of electric buses on routes in a number of towns including Barnstaple”; and
- “Progress is also being made on bus priority measures identified in our BSIPs [Bus Service Improvement Plans] in Exeter, Newton Abbot and Barnstaple.”

The Competition Commission’s conclusion that car users have a low propensity to switch to bus is quoted earlier. Although it covers a different type of scheme, the Department for Transport’s evaluation<sup>117</sup> of the Okehampton line reopening project contains the graphic on the following page comparing the generalised cost of time between rail and bus journeys. For the purpose of this section, the key point is the fact that bus scores

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<sup>115</sup> HM Treasury, 5 February 2026:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The\\_Green\\_Book\\_2026.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The_Green_Book_2026.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>117</sup> *Dartmoor Line Early Impact Evaluation*, Department for Transport, March 2025:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d119dce65dc716bfb1dbbc/dartmoor-line-early-impact-evaluation.pdf>

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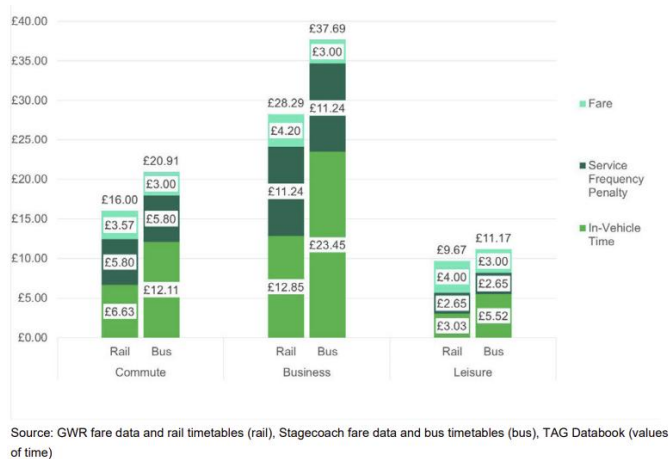


Figure 19: Generalised cost by journey purpose for rail and bus Okehampton to Exeter

a higher generalised time cost for all types of users than rail, even with lower fares. Business users and work commuters attribute a substantially higher generalised cost than leisure travellers do. This is consistent with the Competition Commission findings and also suggests that an attempt to use a bus alternative would not find favour with travellers, in particular those not travelling for leisure purposes.

Moreover, a Barnstaple to Exeter bus service would suffer from even worse journey times than the current train service. This was demonstrated during mid-November 2025 when the rail route was closed by Network Rail

owing to concerns about bridge stability after heavy rainfall put the River Taw into spate. Some rail replacement buses were run, but with best timings 20 minutes slower than the trains they replaced.

In summary, while there are probably further things which could be done to improve bus services and which could well be worthwhile to improve those services for local purposes, they would neither do much to address slow journey times between Barnstaple and Exeter by existing public transport and hence drive greater take-up of that mode, nor would they be likely to drive environmentally-desirable modal shift from cars, in particular given the low propensity of car users to switch to bus.

#### Option 3): Active travel improvements

The distance between Barnstaple and Exeter and also between the intermediate stations and Exeter is too great for active travel to be relevant to the proposed objectives over the corridor as a whole.

However, that is not the case in relation to access to the stations from their hinterland and proposals are made to address the poor accessibility of several of the stations by active travel modes.

#### Option 4): Train service and route modernisation options

The strategic analysis of the route in the previous section suggests that improvement to the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route both has the potential to address key socio-economic issues in Northern Devon and Mid Devon and that route is one which is well placed to make a success of any such investment.

On the basis of the strategic analysis in the previous section and through discussion with the rail industry and other stakeholders, a vision for a complete modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple line has been developed, including the following potential improvement outcomes:

As part of a vision for a complete modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple line, a range of options have been identified, including the following potential improvement outcomes:

- The Exeter-Barnstaple rail route provides an important contribution to improved sustainability of transport connectivity for Northern Devon, Mid Devon and Exeter;
- Materially faster typical journey times, with a fastest journey between Barnstaple and Exeter St Davids of no more than 54 minutes (Exeter Central typically 60 minutes), with potential further material journey time savings: significantly better than any bus journey time and competitive with variable and often unpredictable car journey times;
- Train service frequency doubled from hourly to two trains per hour between Barnstaple and Exeter (three trains per hour for Crediton);
- Very substantial increases in the numbers of passengers and revenue resulting from the combined effect of increasing frequency and reducing journey times;
- Significantly improved punctuality and reliability for both Barnstaple and Okehampton train services, with reduced knock-on delay to other parts of the national network;
- Modern, faster accelerating, more reliable, higher capacity, more accessible, more comfortable, more environmentally-friendly trains replace diesel trains on the line;

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- Train service capacity substantially increased, both for continuing growth on the Barnstaple-Exeter route and for any reinstatement of train services to Bideford;
- Intermediate stations easier and safer to access and use by car/EV and active travel modes, including for disabled people; and
- Stations and the train service brought into the digital age with wi-fi where not present, better mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route and digital ticketing.

This vision and outcomes are supported by a set of illustrative improvement interventions, subject to further engineering, operational and economic review as the business case progresses. The improvement interventions are analysed in more detail in Annex A. The list is not all-or-nothing: elements could be chosen depending on funding available and priorities, including a potential phased implementation over time, with elements prioritised for earlier or later implementation on the basis of a combination of cost and funding availability.

While the stations/accessibility interventions are highly scalable, the same is much less true of the interventions needed to modernise the railway infrastructure. Many station accessibility interventions could be implemented separately and in smaller or larger numbers and still give benefits to users. In contrast, it is not feasible, for example, to introduce additional passing places to facilitate an increase in the frequency of the train service without also modernising the signalling system and in some cases having to rebuild a second station platform. Equally, improvements to maximum permitted line speeds or introducing new, faster accelerating trains would not reduce journey times unless additional train passing capability was introduced. The many years that have passed with relatively little work being done on the line means that meaningful modernisation outside the stations needs a large step change in the capability of the infrastructure with a concomitantly large price tag.

#### *Interventions: Modernising the railway infrastructure*

- Raising line speeds at places where higher permitted maximum speeds could in practice be used to reduce journey times;
- Replacing all remaining sections of old jointed track with continuously welded rail;
- Creating a dynamic loop of around seven miles between Newton St Cyres and the former Coleford Junction by reinstating double track between Newton St Cyres and Crediton and installing new point work at the former Coleford Junction, thereby converting the parallel currently single lines from Crediton to Okehampton and Barnstaple into double track;
- Creating additional double track on the northern part of the route to allow trains to pass each other, subject to further engineering and operational study;
- Reinstating the second platform at Yeoford on the new double track section, where possible reusing old platform structures and avoiding lifts unless absolutely necessary;
- Modernising crossing control and signalling systems; and
- Changing station request stop status: removal of request stop status at more heavily used stations and station stop kiosks installed at less-used stations to reduce journey time-delaying speed reductions at those stations.

#### *Interventions: Introducing modern trains*

- As part of separate, complementary scheme, replacing diesel trains on the route with modern trains offering:
  - Shorter journey times through much higher acceleration;
  - Greater reliability;
  - Selective door opening to achieve greater capacity without costly platform lengthening;
  - More comfort for passengers;
  - Ideally level boarding for improved accessibility; and
  - Greater environmental friendliness, including lower noise levels.

#### *Interventions: Improving the usability and accessibility of the stations*

- Improving selected station car parks to good modern standards;
- Enlarging existing station car parks at key stations;
- Installing electric vehicle chargers at all stations with formal car parks;
- Installing ticket machines at larger, higher use stations, and pay-as-you-go;

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- Installing wi-fi at stations without it and improving mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route;
- Creating improved, safer access to intermediate stations for pedestrians and other users; and
- Improving road layouts at key level crossings for the safety of road and rail users.

The table below assessing options is modelled directly on the table and RAGG ratings recommended by the Department for Transport as explained above. The Strategic Priorities map directly to those listed in the sections above analysing alignment with local, district, county, regional and national strategies:

- “Red (R): the option opposes or creates tension with achieving the strategic priority and/or the SMART spending objective
- Amber (A): the option has a minimal impact or has a small contribution to achieving the strategic priority and/or the SMART spending objective
- Green (G): the option has a strong strategic fit to contributing to achieving the strategic priority and/or the SMART spending objective
- Grey (GY): the option has no impact on achieving the strategic priority and/or the SMART spending objective, or the strategic priority is irrelevant.”

Strategic Assessment of Options					
Level of Strategy	Strategic Priority	Option 1) Road	Option 2) Bus	Option 3) Active	Option 4) Train
<b>National Net Zero Strategy</b>	Increase the share of journeys taken by public transport, cycling and walking ... Support decarbonisation by investing more than £12 billion in local transport systems over the current Parliament	R	A	G	G
	Improving performance on the railways and driving forward rail reform	GY	GY	GY	G
<b>Department for Transport Strategic Priorities</b>	Improving bus services and growing usage across the country	GY	A	GY	G
	Transforming infrastructure to work for the whole country, promoting social mobility and tackling regional inequality	A	A	A	G
	Delivering greener transport	R	A	A	G
	Better integrating transport networks	R	A	G	G
	DCC <i>Strategic Plan</i> : Make Devon Greener by prioritising sustainable travel and transport; Support Economic Recovery and Growth; Help Communities be Safe, Connected and Resilient by delivering infrastructure which will increase the range of travel choices; Improve accessibility to jobs and services, tackling social isolation in rural parts of the County	A	A	A	G
<b>Regional and local strategies</b>	Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority <i>Local Transport Plan Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040</i> : “Working with the rail industry we will prioritise making the case for enhancing services on the North Devon Line to provide a half hourly frequency and journey times to Exeter of under an hour”	R	G	GY	G
	Devon County Council <i>Market &amp; Coastal Towns and Rural Devon (sub) Strategy</i> : a vision for Devon’s market and coastal towns to be “better connected to their closest urban area, for the journey to work, access to health care, education, training, leisure and retail”	A	A	A	G
	Peninsula Transport <i>Peninsula Rail Strategy</i> : for long term transition to sustainability access to railway stations by walking, cycling or public transport should be encouraged ... reopen or build new stations so that a greater portion of the population live within 10 km of a station and are more likely to access it by sustainable modes	R	G	G	G
	<i>Devon Climate Emergency Declaration</i> : Travelling less and using improved walking, cycling and public	R	G	G	G

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	transport infrastructure more often, and using electric and hydrogen vehicles				
<b>Scheme Objectives</b>	1): Create transformational change to the Exeter to Barnstaple line by providing a platform for continued modernisation through future investment beyond the more limited 'patch and repair' of the past, in particular ensuring more punctual/reliable train services	G	A	A	G
	2): Provide additional capacity to the rail network between Exeter and Barnstaple to support and mitigate the impacts of current and expected future demand growth including where driven by increasing local population and planned housing expansion, also including if train services are extended to Bideford	R	A	A	G
	3): Improve socio-economic conditions in the Northern Devon and Mid Devon areas by reducing the negative impacts of peripherality, assisting in lifting productivity, prosperity and local economic growth	R	G	G	G
	4): Enable rail and more sustainable active and public transport modes to take an increased share of overall transport demand, itself growing as local population and housing increase, to contribute towards decarbonising transport on the Northern Devon - Exeter corridor	A	GY	GY	G
	5): Enhance access to employment opportunities, education and healthcare in Exeter and beyond for Northern Devon and Mid Devon residents, facilitate access to 'hard-to-recruit' jobs for people outside these areas, in particular by improving station usability for all passengers	R	G	GY	G
	6): Improve visitor access by sustainable public transport to the natural environment, including the Tarka Trail, the South West Coast Path, the Two Moors Way, the Exmoor National Park, the North Devon National Landscape, the UNESCO North Devon Biosphere and other coastal areas	R	G	G	G

#### *The Do-Nothing option (business as usual)*

It is normal for the Strategic Case to explore the so-called 'Do-Nothing Option'. The most recent version of the HM Treasury *Green Book*<sup>118</sup> prefers the more precise formulation of 'business as usual', which it describes as: "the outcome that is expected if current arrangements continue and the proposal is not implemented." The reason that this is relevant is that a small number of items included in this document are likely to happen in the absence of agreement to wider programme of modernisation because they count as 'renewals' rather than 'enhancements' under the Network Rail funding formulae. As explained elsewhere, 'enhancements' are subject to agree through a business case process of which this is the start rather than the ongoing fully funded process of operations, maintenance and renewal. Even within this distinction there may be a difference in outcome, as this document argues in favour of coordination of renewals with enhancements, which may in practice result in acceleration of renewals compared to what would happen in the absence of the modernisation scheme. Examples of relevant renewals include the elimination of old jointed track in favour of continuously welded rail and elements of signalling and train control.

A more fully developed SOBC could include a series of tables and other analytical material to show how doing nothing would mean that the socio-economic and other issues the preferred option is intended to address would at best not improve or at worst might deteriorate further.

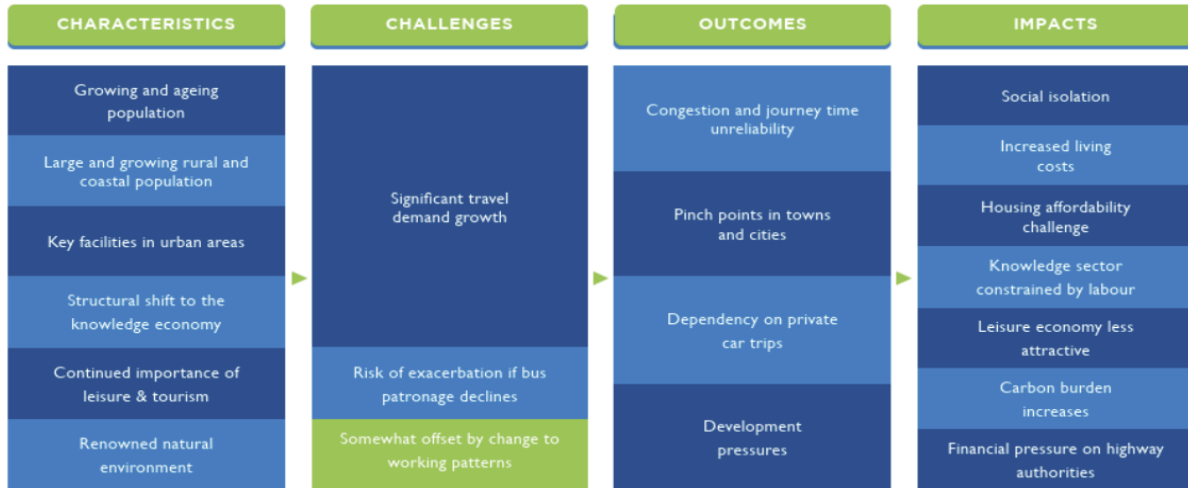
<sup>118</sup> HM Treasury, 5 February 2026: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The\\_Green\\_Book\\_2026.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The_Green_Book_2026.pdf)

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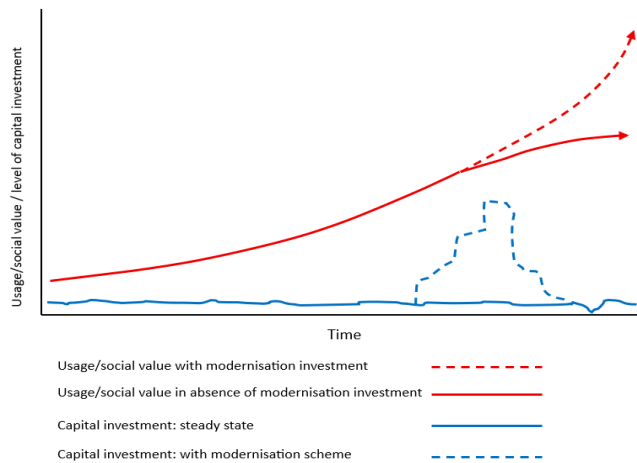
## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

In this business case at this early stage of development, those are not included and readers are asked instead simply to interpret for themselves from their reading of the material provided earlier in this document what non-improvement of the indicators shown earlier would mean.

The table in the Alignment with Local, District, County and Regional Strategies section above taken from Peninsula Transport's *Peninsula Rail Strategy* sets out its general view of the impacts of not investing in rail. It is repeated here for ease of reference:



One important point to highlight, however, is that 'Do-Nothing/'Business as Usual' is not the same as seeking funding and failing to gain it. Others elsewhere in the country are not doing nothing, but are very actively pursuing funding for transport improvements as part of their local and regional development plans. That means that the 'status quo' for Northern Devon's and Mid Devon's relative positions regionally and nationally is not static.



A simple graphical representation of failure to invest materially in the modernisation of the route, in particular failure to address the limitations the heavily rationalised infrastructure places on the ability of the train serviced to address and encourage increased demand and the derived social value is shown in the adjacent chart (author), with failure to invest leading to choking off of demand and usage:

### The impacts of the proposal: 'theory of change'

The Department for Transport's guidance<sup>119</sup> recommends that a 'theory of change' should be developed to show how the transport proposal would lead to the intended outcomes.

Developing a full theory of change is a substantial task and one that was not judged possible at this early stage of development of the business case. One of the issues with the theory of change approach is that in practice it can lead to a lot of repetition of arguments given elsewhere in the business case.

The following diagram is taken from the DfT guidance and has been annotated to highlight some key points. The coloured boxes highlight elements of particular relevance to the Exeter to Barnstaple route modernisation scheme.

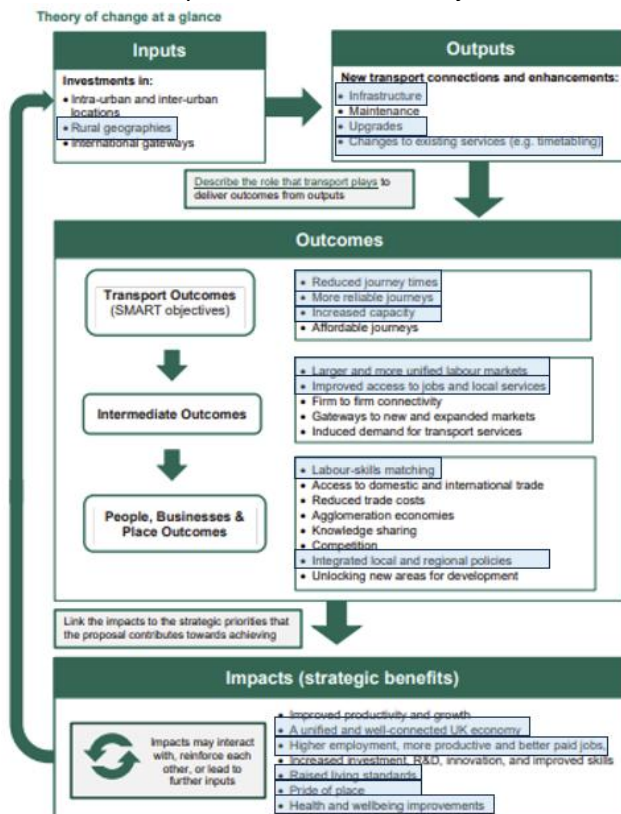
<sup>119</sup> Department for Transport, *Transport Business Cases: The Levelling Up Toolkit*, February 2022.

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Key points made elsewhere in this document that a more fully developed theory of change could highlight include:

- Northern Devon and surrounding areas in Torridge are cut off - 'peripheral' - in public transport terms because of the slowness of train services relative to the physical distance travelled. Rail journey times are extended as a result of the low speeds for the distance involved: the need for trains to wait at passing places on the single track route and to serve smaller intermediate stations means that typical journey times are materially slower than the fastest possible. Car journeys suffer as a result of serious congestion in Barnstaple and Exeter. Buses are infrequent and the indirect routes result in very extended journey times;
- The Barnstaple rail route currently suffers from poor performance and reliability, which is exacerbated by the limitations of the infrastructure and which also impacts on longer-distance services as a result of the interface between train services in Exeter;
- The *Transport Strategy for the Market & Coastal Towns and Rural Areas* contained in the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 3, 2011-2026* identifies that "the trend for employment growth would be in areas such as Barnstaple, Exeter, Newton Abbot, Plymouth and Torbay. The road, including bus travel, and rail links to these centres are critical and should therefore form the core of the strategy."
- Similar concentration arguments apply to tertiary education, health care and activities such as shopping and leisure more generally. A rail scheme could facilitate the economic integration of marginalised, disadvantaged communities with their principal economic hubs, increasing rates of participation and sharing opportunities for greater socio-economic prosperity;
- Rail is preferred for these purposes because it does not suffer from the road congestion car and bus do, in particular within the urban areas of Exeter and Barnstaple, is much quicker than bus (which nevertheless still has critical roles to play as a local distributor) and because it provides a means of addressing the sustainability and decarbonisation objectives in local and regional strategies;



- Rail in the South West generally has not seen the same level of demand drop resulting from increased home working seen in some other parts of the country and the Barnstaple route has seen very strong growth, with usage substantially above the best pre-pandemic level. Exeter continues to have unusually high levels of rail usage/modal share both regionally and nationally;
- In spite of recent capacity improvements on the route, the rapidly increasing demand is resulting in crowding at the busiest times and there is insufficient capacity to accommodate further growth that would also see rail increasing the benefits it brings to the areas served; and
- Rail also provides direct connectivity to the wider national rail network at Exeter and can provide ways for outside specialist contractors and others working in hard-to-recruit fields in the Bideford and surrounding areas to access employment and for tourists and other leisure travellers to access the Tarka Trail and other attractions sustainably.

### Stakeholder views

The Exeter to Barnstaple route modernisation scheme is at a very early stage of development and no formal public consultation has been carried out. With growing local interest, including at local authority level, the Tarka Rail Association (now North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group) and Railfuture initiated the concept of a

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new Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) in 2023 as a wider forum for representatives of local, regional and national stakeholder organisations.

Bideford Town Council formally became the founder member of the NDRDA in December 2023, followed by Railfuture and Tarka Rail Association (now North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group), then Barnstaple Town Council in January 2024, and Northam Town Council in February 2024, followed by Torridge District Council in April 2024. An inaugural event was held at the Royal Hotel in Bideford on 1 March 2024 with wide representation from the public and private sectors and the rail industry including at senior levels established a model for an annual Alliance forum of stakeholder organisation leaders. A copy of the leaflet for the inaugural meeting including a list of invited parties and resolutions of support from local authorities can be found in Annex D.

At the inaugural event letters of support from both local MPs (Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP for Torridge and West Devon and Selaine Saxby MP for North Devon) and from the Devon County Council Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport (Cllr Andrea Davis) were read out, as all three had prior diary commitments (copies of the letters in Annex E). Statements of support were also made by a number of others, including Bideford Mayor Cllr Jamie McKenzie, Barnstaple Mayor Cllr Louisa York, South West Business Council CEO Paul Coles, Harland & Wolff (now Navantis) General Manager Tom Hart, Network Rail Western Route Director Marcus Jones BEM, Network Rail Programme Director Restoring Your Railway Mike Smith and GWR Head of Strategic Service Development Matt Barnes.

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### Economic Case

The Department for Transport's guidance explains that the Economic Case "demonstrates the value for money and the best choice for maximising social welfare through options appraisal – the 'economic dimension'."

Neither Railfuture nor the author have the expertise to build a properly constructed Economic Case, in particular because that would require the economic appraisal capability to appraise the financial information provided in the Financial Case, which itself has not been constructed to the level needed to be the basis for a meaningful Economic Case at this stage. Moreover, at this stage preferred interventions have not been identified at a sufficient level of detail to enable worthwhile costing exercises to be undertaken.

#### *Evidence of usage from other rail improvement schemes*

One point that the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance would wish to see fully explored in any further work on the Economic Case is evidence from other schemes about how actual usage has correlated with predicted usage in the economic modelling done for those schemes. It has become a common place in railway planning commentary that the economic cases underestimate usage, with all more recent schemes appearing to reflect that trend.

It is recognised that forecasting schemes to improve train services substantially present real technical issues for economic forecasters. In particular, the well-established models used in rail circles such as MOIRA extrapolate from past experience and also focus on smaller changes – point-elasticity - rather than larger transformational changes. There are also other genuine technical issues to be debated and resolved which depend partly on the nature of the scheme at hand such as whether to use trip rate or trip diversion modelling techniques.

Nevertheless, the Economic Case will need to address this issue. Under-forecasting or excessive conservatism may satisfy those who fear a large investment may prove to be a 'white elephant', but if an otherwise sound investment is inhibited as a result or the scheme does go ahead but costs and construction scope<sup>120</sup> are reduced beyond what might otherwise be achieved for the same reason, the beneficiaries of the scheme will not enjoy its full benefits and future more economical service expansion and improvement could be inhibited.

#### *Doubling of frequency of train services*

Given the potentially high cost of the infrastructure improvements that would both enable shorter journey times and a doubling of train service frequency, there will need to be analysis of the economic benefits of the different approaches of running materially longer trains at today's frequency compared with more frequent trains with materially shorter journey times that would potentially generate additional passenger usage and income from the elasticity of demand in respect of both journey time and frequency. Any such analysis would also need to take account of the continuing impact of the constrained infrastructure on operational performance, even if new trains with higher acceleration provide some journey time savings on the northern part of the route and thereby increase turn-round times at Barnstaple.

A further task within this analysis will be to test the hypothesis explained in the Strategic Case that an effective doubling of train service frequency by running a pair of trains per hour with broadly similar running times would perform better in passenger usage/ticket sale income terms than a different model with one materially faster train per hour and another slower train taking up most intermediate stops.

#### *Social Value*

One technique which could be of considerable potential value for a rail improvement scheme in an area with the difficult socio-demographic characteristics of Northern Devon derives from the field of social value economics. The Rail Safety & Standards Board has developed and published a 'tool' (*The Rail Social Value Tool*<sup>121</sup>) to help practitioners understand and maximise the social value of their schemes.

The RSSB explains that the tool: "supports organisations in forecasting, measuring and evaluating outcomes and social impact in a way that can be easily shared with industry and beyond. Organisations can identify

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<sup>120</sup> Both the reopened Borders Railway between Edinburgh and Tweedbank and the reopened Ebbw Vale railway have encountered issues with capacity for growth and additional train services being constrained by early decisions to reduce project scope. In the case of the Ebbw Vale railway, it has proved necessary to lengthen a passing loop to enable a through train service between Ebbw Vale and Newport to operate.

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.rssb.co.uk/sustainability/maximising-social-value/the-rail-social-value-tool>. Other social value measurement tools are also available.

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opportunities to increase the benefit they offer, track outcomes of project, or review operations and to see achievements. The data generated can be used in many ways. For example, to track performance and share with stakeholders in reports, or Environmental, Social and Governance publications, or Corporate Social Responsibility publications. Similarly, the accessible nature of the information, in pounds and pence, can be easily shared directly via social and printed media. The monetised and non-monetised values enable users to monitor a range of information and provide engaging and credible stories. For consistency with industry and public sector, the monetised values are aligned with HM Treasury Green Book Principles.”

The tool can develop “valuations and proxies that align with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals.” There are 17 Goals, many of which show a strong alignment with the objectives suggested in this document, for example: “No poverty”, “Good health and wellbeing”, “Quality education”, “Decent work and economic growth”, “Industry, innovation and infrastructure”, “Reduced inequalities”, “Sustainable cities and communities”.

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### Commercial Case

The Department for Transport's guidance explains that the Commercial Case "illustrates the commercial viability and supply-side capacity for the proposal – the 'commercial dimension'".

At this early stage of business case construction it is not the intention to present a fully developed Commercial Case. That would be premature, as many of the factors to be covered depend on fuller development of other elements of the business case, in particular the Management Case. Key elements of the Commercial Case will be for the party promoting the modernisation of the route between Barnstaple and Exeter to decide within the governance and stakeholder management structures developed within the Management Case.

Nevertheless, consideration of other elements of the business case suggests a number of Commercial Case factors for development, which are highlighted below.

*A workable Commercial Case is likely to be capable of development*

This document starts from the assumption that a workable Commercial Case can be developed. That is based on the premise that few things proposed in this business case are without recent successful precedent, including where the promoter has been a local authority. The following non-exhaustive list of smaller/mid-scale schemes is intended to demonstrate that point:

- The Okehampton project upgraded 14 miles of existing track, including replacing large sections of track and track bed, upgrading drainage, improving earthwork stability, constructing GSMR railway radio masts and refurbishing Okehampton station and car park to enable the reintroduction of passenger train services in November 2021;
- The Barking Riverside project constructed one mile of new track, a major grade separated junction and a new terminus station to enable London Overground trains to access the major development area at Barking Riverside, with train services starting in July 2022;
- The Ebbw Vale project has installed 2 miles of new track for the creation of a 7-mile passing loop and built new platforms at two stations to enable the introduction of a new through train service between Ebbw Vale and Newport in December 2023;
- The Levenmouth rail project in Scotland has completed the laying of six miles of new track on the disused railway line to Leven, including extensive repairs to existing bridges and two new stations to permit the reintroduction of passenger train services to Cameron Bridge and Leven, which took place in June 2024;
- The Northumberland Line scheme from Newcastle has seen the upgrading of an 18 mile existing freight line with additional passing places, several upgraded level crossings and a major new road bridge, with five new build stations (some opening in 2025/2026), with the first trains running in December 2024;
- The East West Rail project has completed the construction of 19 miles of new double track on the mothballed alignment between Bicester and Bletchley, including substantial earthworks improvements, the creation of a new vertical alignment to allow HS2 to be crossed at Claydon, the construction of a new two-track station at Winslow and the reconstruction of the major flyover over the West Coast Main Line at Bletchley and associated additional platforms for Bletchley station, already used by freight trains, with passenger train services expected to start in 2026; and
- In the Great Western franchise area the construction and bringing into use during 2023 of three new stations in entirely new locations at Reading Green Park (two platforms on the Reading to Basingstoke line), Portway Park & Ride (one platform on the Bristol Temple Meads to Severn Beach line), Marsh Barton (two platforms on the Exeter to Newton Abbot line) and one station in 2024 at Ashley Down (two platforms on the Bristol Temple Meads to Bristol Parkway line).

#### *Engineering contracting strategy*

Any significant civil engineering project needs to decide how to structure the letting of the contracts for the construction of the new railway, including specialist railway disciplines such as track laying and signalling. Without limitation, key factors include:

- The amount of cost risk the contractor[s] should be asked to take<sup>122</sup>;

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<sup>122</sup> Central Government grant funding usually provides for the recipient local authority to take the risk on out-turn cost exceeding the grant. This raises the question of risk-based trade-offs such as whether it would be better to ask contractors to take more financial risk even if that meant the initial price was higher.

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- How the management of the contracts should be arranged (for example, whether there should be a prime contractor managing other contractors or should the client do this itself);
- The extent to which certain design elements might be considered from an early stage as potentially descopable later in the project if downside cost risks arise;
- Whether some elements should be managed separately<sup>123</sup> from the main scheme; and
- The extent to which the contractors should be allowed to have a say in design factors<sup>124</sup>.

The last point about a potential role for contractors in design is important, as decisions on commercial contracting strategy should not be left until late in the project's life cycle. If they are, some options such as involving contractors at an earlier stage in design to take advantage of lower cost or better value or lower risk options they might be able to identify are eliminated. More is said about this in the Management Case. For example, if sustainable/low emission/low noise construction techniques as mentioned in the Management Case are to be guaranteed to stakeholders, they need to form part of the commercial procurement process with contractors.

The Management Case identifies the most likely approach being that Network Rail would take over the management of the scheme at a later stage in business case development. As a very large organisation one of whose core capabilities is the definition, letting and management of major civil and railway engineering projects, with large numbers of experienced, knowledgeable staff, Network Rail would be best placed to lead the construction commercial activity.

A key reason for Network Rail involvement is that it owns the infrastructure this scheme proposes to modernise. As an entity regulated by the Office for Rail & Road (ORR), Network Rail has to follow regulatory rules about the stewardship of its assets, including safety of operation and their renewal and enhancement.

Network Rail's Control Period settlements in outline provide for ongoing funding of maintenance and renewals and also any enhancements which the Government has confirmed it will fund. Some elements of the modernisation programme may already be funded through the regulated Control Period settlements made for Network Rail by the Office of Rail and Road. Other elements may be in Network Rail's forward plans for later control periods, but under the central premise of the modernisation programme of creating a fully modern railway in a single scheme rather than allowing a continued set of piecemeal interventions to continue into the future, could be brought forward with external funding. It would be important to ensure that these changes in regulatory assumptions ensuing from external funding are fully accounted for with ORR and Network Rail.

By way of example, it seems likely that all jointed track on the route will eventually be replaced through renewals<sup>125</sup>. Any jointed track replacement funded through planned renewals in the Network Rail Control Period<sup>126</sup> current at the time the modernisation programme is taken forward would not need additional external funding. Other jointed track replacement not included in the relevant Control Period renewals assumptions could be undertaken with external funding: 'accelerated'. Any such external funding would be taken account of in later Control Periods and for the purposes of understanding the state of repair of Network Rail's regulated asset base.

Other elements of regulated Network Rail spend could potentially be of relevance. For example, in Control Period 6 to 31 March 2024, Network Rail had a Performance Innovation Fund. Similar future funds, which may require competitive bidding with other schemes, could potentially provide additional elements of funding for parts of the overall modernisation programme that meet the relevant criteria.

The Department for Transport's consultation on the restructuring of the railways<sup>127</sup> proposes the creation of a new body, Great British Railways, to take over the functions of Network Rail and the train operators and also proposes changes to the regulatory model, including the role of ORR. Little is said about enhancements or

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<sup>123</sup> An example in the Tavistock scheme is the new station car park at Tavistock.

<sup>124</sup> The arguments in favour typically reference contractors' experience of construction issues and new construction technologies as a basis for them being able to identify potentially lower cost or higher net value alternative approaches or construction innovations that the promoter could not identify.

<sup>125</sup> It is considered to be an outdated technology with a high level of maintenance cost.

<sup>126</sup> The Control Period current at the date of this report is Control Period 7 from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2029.

<sup>127</sup> *A Railway Fit for Britain's Future*, February 2025: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67b30e36b56d8b0856c2fd49/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future.pdf>

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improvements and these developments will need to be accommodated by future iterations of the business case.

#### *Section 106, Community Infrastructure Levy and land value capture*

Until the publication of the English devolution White Paper emphasising the future importance of devolution of public sector investment decisions, the traditional most likely source of capital funding for modernising the railway between Barnstaple and Exeter beyond that potentially available through existing regulated renewal programmes was central government capital grant. Nevertheless, other sources should also be investigated. This section looks briefly at potential developer funding sources (Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy) and landowner funding sources (land allows value capture).

Section 106<sup>128</sup> allows a local authority to require developers to make financial contributions to infrastructure and sometimes non-capital costs. A good example is the section 106-funded car park at the planned new Tavistock station set out in the SOBC<sup>129</sup> for that rail reopening. An important point is that the requirements cannot be made retrospectively. The business case for the reopening would need to be kept in mind when planning permissions are being given. Under section 106 the contributions should relate directly to the impacts of the development, while the Community Infrastructure Levy allows wider application.

Land value capture works on the principle that landowners should not benefit from the whole of windfall increase in value of their land that results in planning permission for development being given. It is a recent technique and there is not a lot of experience of its use, though it is understood on the basis of statements by Northumberland County Council's Strategic Transport Manager<sup>130</sup> that it has been used to help finance the reopening of the Northumberland Line between Newcastle and Ashington in 2024.

Like section 106, land value capture cannot be applied retrospectively and its use depends on a close alignment between development of the business case for train service reinstatement and local authority planning permissions. A key part of the technique is that it involves landowners signing up to the terms in advance. It is unclear whether the principle could be applied more widely or whether it is a model that would appeal to the local authorities. Specialist advice would be necessary.

The limited usage made so far of land value capture has mostly been in connection with the provision of new railway facilities through a line reopening. The modernisation programme does not provide new railway connectivity in that sense. However, to the extent that car parking and other station accessibility problems limit the take-up of railway services at some intermediate stations, that might be an area of potential applicability. It is noted that the proposal to fund the station car park at a reinstated Tavistock station provides a precedent.

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<sup>128</sup> Powers derived from section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

<sup>129</sup> Devon County Council - *Tavistock-Plymouth Line Reopening Strategic Outline Business Case – Restoring Your Railway: RYR387*, 22 September 2022: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/outline-business-case-submitted-for-reopening-tavistock-to-plymouth-rail-line/>

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in an interview in *Modern Railways* magazine, March 2024.

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### Financial Case

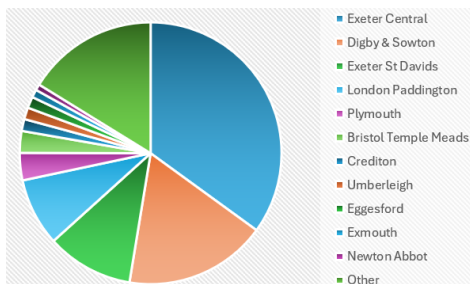
The Department for Transport's guidance explains that the Financial Case "demonstrates the proposal is financially affordable – the 'financial dimension'."

#### *Cost and revenue estimates*

The author does not have the expertise to build a full Financial Case. Moreover, given that no decisions have been taken at this early stage on what elements should be included in the scope of works, it is not possible to give an estimate of the likely capital cost. Nor is it possible at this early stage of development to indicate what the impact on fare income might be. Along with development of a capital cost estimate, that will be a key task in the further development of the business case.

As more fully explored in the Strategic Case, rail economic models show generalised strong elasticity of demand responses to improvements both in frequency and material journey time reductions. The Barnstaple route is already showing very strong growth on the back of a longer-term trend in growth. The Strategic Case identifies a range of further factors holding back demand which, if addressed through the scheme, could be expected to provide further stimulus to growth in usage.

An important issue in calculating the level of incremental income from the reinstated train service will be identifying the proportion of users who already use the train from Barnstaple compared to those who are genuinely new to rail. The effect is magnified the longer the journey involved. For example, a single ticket between Barnstaple and Exeter is currently £7.80, while an Any Time Day Single Barnstaple to London Paddington is £149.50<sup>131</sup>. It will be important to understand this distinction more fully, as GWR suggests that the Okehampton line opened in 2021 has higher incremental contributory revenue from longer journeys on the network than at first estimated.



The adjacent chart (Railfuture based on ORR figures analysed online<sup>132</sup>) shows the top 12 destinations by numbers of passengers from Barnstaple in 2022-23. While the three key destinations in Exeter dominate<sup>133</sup>, the longer-distance destinations of London, Plymouth and Bristol comprise at least 14.43% of the total.

The importance of longer-distance contributory revenue is emphasised in the Department for Transport's evaluation<sup>134</sup> of the reopening of the Okehampton line, where it is one of the factors that has contributed to higher than expected revenue and

the train service running in surplus without the need for subsidy: "On the revenue side, the actual revenue generated by the Dartmoor Line in 2023/24 is estimated to be 65% higher than forecast (over £1 m). This is primarily linked to demand being higher than forecast at FBC stage (as discussed in section 5.8) and a higher-than expected average yield resulting from greater levels of longer-distance travel including to/from London."

#### *Sources of funding – rail enhancement funding*

The Government has indicated<sup>135</sup> in its plans for rail industry that the current basic structure of funding for Network Rail will continue. Network Rail's regulated financing overseen by the Office of Rail & Road (ORR) is based on five year periods of agreed funding ('Control Periods'). Within each set of five years Network Rail is allowed what ORR considers to be enough money to ensure the continued safe operation of trains and the maintenance of existing assets, their renewal when necessary and a separate pot of money to enhance the assets.

<sup>131</sup> Long-distance fares include lower-priced book-ahead and other options and this fare is given solely by way of example.

<sup>132</sup> <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/richard.rowson/viz/RailODManalysis2022-23/Topdestinationsbystation>

<sup>133</sup> Based on a conversation with the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, the figures might overstate Digby & Sowton journeys compared to Exeter Central and Exeter St Davids, as some Exeter College students purchase tickets to Digby & Sowton because elements of their courses take place there, but do not necessarily make all their journeys to that station.

<sup>134</sup> *Bideford to Barnstaple Line Reopening Engineering Feasibility and Economic Appraisal Executive - Executive Summary*, SLC Rail, August 2025 – also for the BCR and capital costs quoted here.

<sup>135</sup> *A Railway Fit for Britain's Future*, February 2025: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67b30e36b56d8b0856c2fd49/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future.pdf>

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In terms of this structure of railway funding, the modernisation elements discussed here mostly fall into the 'enhancement' pot. Enhancement funding is discretionary and subject to the support of a successful business case. In the absence of such enhancement funding, it is assumed that Network Rail will continue to maintain and renew the route to maintain its safety and structural integrity. Some elements of ongoing renewal such as the replacement of jointed track with continuously welded rail are nevertheless discussed as they are of relevance to the wider modernisation program. Their acceleration compared to underlying steady-state plans could be considered an enhancement.

It should also be noted that if the route were to be fully modernised, including the doubling of the train service, it is likely that previous maintenance and renewal spend assumptions contained in the Control Period settlement will need to be reviewed. An increase in train services would result in higher wear and tear on existing assets and there would be more assets to maintain and renew. Examples include more track and point work where passing loops were installed and new signalling and train control systems to enable the operation of those new sections of double track and to replace outdated systems currently in use. There would also be increases in ongoing day-to-day operating costs, both for the network and for train services.

#### *Other potential sources of funding*

Other central government funding pots have become open to rail projects in recent years, even when not sponsored by the Department for Transport. Typically, only local authorities have been able to apply and funding has been subject to a competitive bidding process. For example, the Mid Cornwall Metro has been funded by the Levelling Up Fund. The Government's English devolution policy set out in the 2024 White Paper<sup>136</sup> criticises such centrally-controlled funding pots and cites rail improvements sponsored locally by existing English authorities with devolved powers such as Transport for London and Liverpool as prime examples of the success of existing devolution arrangements. The White Paper (section 3.3.) states: "High quality transport infrastructure supports growth and opportunity. Bringing decisions about transport closer to people is key to improving the transport networks we rely on every day. We will therefore empower Strategic Authorities to take greater oversight of their local transport networks".

Devolved funding led by a new Strategic Authority therefore seems one of the more likely routes forward for funding for the scheme. However, much remains to be clarified and timescales in particular may be considerable. In particular, devolution as set out in the White Paper depends on institutional changes beyond the scope of this document, including the abolition of district councils and the creation of larger strategic authorities emulating the combined authorities already found in some urban parts of the country.

The White Paper anticipates that most devolution will be led by Mayoral Strategic Authorities. Devon County Council and Torbay Council have already made the first steps towards the creation of such a body through working together to create a non-mayoral Combined County Authority. At the date of this document, the type and final geographical extent of a Strategic Authority covering the Devon area remained unresolved.

The Commercial Case briefly touches on potential private sector funding in the form of section 106 funding from developers, Community Infrastructure Levy and the relatively recent approach of land value capture.

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<sup>136</sup> *English Devolution White Paper – Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, 16 December 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

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### Management Case

#### *Developing management arrangements for the scheme*

So far the scheme to modernise the route between Barnstaple and Exeter has run as a local campaign in parallel with early investigation by Network Rail and GWR of options for improving the infrastructure and train services. Since early 2025 local representatives of Network Rail and GWR have met monthly with the author and other members of the Alliance to share the findings of their early work on the scheme. They have had the opportunity to review this document and have discussed in detail and provided comments on the objectives, the problem statement, the lists of improvement outcomes and improvement interventions, the Risk Register, and other elements of the document. Nevertheless, it is recognised that more formal arrangements for the management of the scheme will need to be put in place as it moves through the various stages of formal business case development.

While in the author's experience many early-stage business cases tend to be light on the development of management arrangements, considerable weight is attached to them here. Numerous reports suggest that key failings in major schemes originate in insufficient attention being given to scheme management, in particular at the early stages of a scheme.

The Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority (DTCCA) formally assumed responsibility for transport matters in Devon and Torbay from Devon County Council and Torbay Council during the course of 2025. The DTCCA adopted the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>137</sup> (LTP) in July 2025. The new LTP says: "Working with the rail industry we will prioritise making the case for enhancing services on the North Devon Line to provide a half hourly frequency and journey times to Exeter of under an hour." The LTP also sets out other commitments and ambitions directly relevant to other elements of this scheme. If these statements of intent are to lead to the improvements referenced in the LTP being made, the DTCCA will need to become formal sponsor of the scheme.

One model for the sponsorship management arrangements are those used for the reopening of the railway line to Tavistock, as described in the Management Case of the Tavistock SOBC<sup>138</sup> and set out in Annex F. In summary, there is a Project Board to provide strategic direction and stakeholder input, with a Steering Group to provide a governance framework of formal decision-making. A key feature of the management arrangements is that at the decision to design stage, they provide for Network Rail to take over the scheme as main Project Sponsor, with support from GWR on the train service arrangements.

Apart from the obvious fact that the scheme deals with Network Rail assets, a key argument in favour of Network Rail leading scheme implementation is that it is one of the few organisations in the country with the procurement/contract management capability, in-depth engineering/railway operating knowledge and of sufficient size and experience of dealing both with major civil engineering contractors and specialist rail contractors. It is also able to coordinate works with any other relevant works elsewhere on its network. For example, the signalling elements of the Mid Cornwall Metro scheme were coordinated with signalling works elsewhere in Cornwall. Equally, as discussed in the Finance and Commercial Cases, elements of funding may derived from Network Rail Control Period funding pots.

It is recognised that the management arrangements proposed for Tavistock might change in the light of experience. It is therefore anticipated that the arrangements for the Exeter to Barnstaple modernisation scheme would follow relevant developments in the management approach taken on the Tavistock project and/or other projects promoted by the DTCCA and/or other projects within the wider Network Rail enhancements portfolio. Given the similarities in scope and its recent implementation, feed-back from the Mid Cornwall Metro project could be especially beneficial. At the date this document was being drafted, Okehampton Interchange station was under construction, sponsored locally in Devon and managed by Network Rail. Due recognition would need to be taken of recommendations made by the National Audit Office or other reports into the progress of rail and other relevant projects.

Another factor to be taken into account is the pace at which the DTCCA develops its capabilities in line with the expectations set out in the Devolution White paper. Decisions would also be needed on the final geographical

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<sup>137</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>138</sup> Devon County Council - *Tavistock-Plymouth Line Reopening Strategic Outline Business Case – Restoring Your Railway: RYR387*, 22 September 2022: <https://www.devon.gov.uk/news/outline-business-case-submitted-for-reopening-tavistock-to-plymouth-rail-line/>

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extent of the authority as one of the new strategic authorities under the White Paper and whether the DTCCA becomes a mayoral authority: the White Paper indicates that non-mayoral authorities would have fewer powers and funding devolved to them.

The central Government grant funding usually used for schemes outside the metropolitan areas to date provides for the recipient local authority to take the risk on out-turn cost exceeding the grant. Conversely, the devolution White Paper indicates a move towards greater financial devolution. Whichever way things fall, it would be important for the DTCCA to have a strong role in the governance of the scheme, including whether it prefers to manage some discrete aspects separately<sup>139</sup> and take other elements of cost risk to its overall portfolio. Some elements of scope might purposely be designated for potential descoping and possible later attention.

Should central funding continue, another role of the management case is to give confidence and assurance to any central Government department[s] which may decide to fund it that the scheme is well managed and that the money is therefore likely to be spent effectively and properly.

An important point to be considered in setting up scheme management arrangements is the fact that the Barnstaple scheme is a programme of different elements. It is possible that funding constraints mean that different elements of the overall scheme are delivered at different times. Emerging funding constraints or unexpected funding availability may mean that the overall scope of the programme needs to change. Equally, different elements of the overall scope may involve different parties in different disciplines whose priorities and constraints need to be coordinated. For example, the delivery of signalling-related elements would be different compared to rolling stock elements.

#### *Relationship with the Department for Transport*

In the shorter term, one body the scheme governance arrangements will need to cover is the Department for Transport in its statutory role as sponsor and funder of train services through its legal agreements with the train operators.

The agreement with the train operator will need to specify that it must operate any additional train services and funding for additional rolling stock, train crew and net operational costs will need to be agreed. One of the reasons for the rapid implementation of the Okehampton scheme was that these matters had been dealt with early. The governance arrangements therefore need to take account of the need for discussion with and representation of the relevant part of the Department from a suitably early stage.

#### *Future organisational changes to rail*

In line with the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act of 28 November 2024, the Government is nationalising the rail franchises as they come to natural term. As set out in its consultation on the future restructuring plans<sup>140</sup>, the Government is aiming to set up Great British Railways as an arm's length body to provide leadership for the industry and to take over both the train operators and Network Rail and integrate them vertically. There is a risk that such major reorganisation distracts key players or that a new organisation such as the Great British Railways takes a different or less sympathetic view of regional rail investment<sup>141</sup>. However, the current rail organisational structures with separate funding lines for infrastructure and train operations/stations may make the integrative approach of the improvement vision outlined in this document more difficult. It is noted that the proposed new structures for the railway involving Great British Railways, which are expressly intended to bring the management of the infrastructure and train services back together ('vertical integration'), are designed to reduce the impact of such barriers and could therefore prove to be positive for this scheme.

The future organisational structure and policy priorities for rail remain to be determined. It is therefore recommended that, as the scheme progresses through the business case stages, continued horizon scanning be used to check for potential impacts on the scheme from wider changes.

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<sup>139</sup> An example in the Tavistock scheme is the new station car park.

<sup>140</sup> *A Railway Fit for Britain's Future*, February 2025: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67b30e36b56d8b0856c2fd49/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future.pdf>

<sup>141</sup> The short-lived Strategic Rail Authority, for example, at first favoured smaller local investment schemes through its Rail Passenger Partnership fund and then, under changed leadership, decided to reduce funding for local train services.

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#### *Post-implementation benefits management: monitoring and evaluation*

The Tavistock SOBC Management Case also describes arrangements for post-construction monitoring and evaluation and says it should be an early part of the development of the business case. This plan needs to fully 'live' and to evolve as the project develops. The the following HM Treasury definitions<sup>142</sup> are cited:

- "Monitoring – seeks to check progress against planned targets and can be defined as the formal reporting and evidencing that spend and outputs are successfully delivered, and milestones met; and
- Evaluation – is the assessment of the initiative's effectiveness and efficiency during and after implementation. It seeks to measure the causal effect of the scheme on planned outcomes and impacts and assessing whether the anticipated benefits have been realised, how this was achieved, or if not, why not."

The SMART objectives in the Strategic Case will need to be a key element of the post-implementation monitoring plan.

It is noted that the Department for Transport, building on a Major Projects Authority requirement, implements its own benefits management review system for its own major projects. Given that the new DTCCA Local Transport Plan supports a wide range of other rail improvements, a feed-back loop of learning from a scheme to modernise the Exeter to Barnstaple line could be highly beneficial to the wider portfolio should it be one of the earlier schemes to be implemented. The Department for Transport has already published a shorter term evaluation<sup>143</sup> of the reopening of the Okehampton line to train services. The report explains a number of areas covered that would benefit from ongoing review and further evaluation.

While monitoring and evaluation are important, there are likely to be benefits from implementing a more active approach to benefits management as well. The large numbers of passengers using it mean that the Borders Railway between Edinburgh and Tweedbank in Scotland is usually seen as a particular success. A key lesson from the Borders Railway reopening is that the local authorities involved in promoting the Borders Railway reopening worked to ensure that it was a success for the local towns and economy too, developing the 'Borders Railway Blueprint' to achieve that goal.

A report on the Blueprint<sup>144</sup> explains that: "In November 2014 a document entitled *Borders Railway – Maximising the Impact: A Blueprint for the Future* was published by the 'Blueprint Group' of partners ... The document sets out the ambitions of the partners 'to realise fully the economic benefits of the new Borders Railway', particularly to stimulate the growth of businesses, generate employment and boost tourist visitor numbers. The Blueprint is structured around three key themes; Great Locations for Working and Investing, Great Communities for Living and Learning, and Great Destinations to Visit. Using these themes the Blueprint Leadership Group has established a more detailed programme of activity and investment, and the Leadership Group meets regularly to oversee the implementation of that programme."

The Northumberland Line between Newcastle and Ashington has taken a broadly similar approach, with Northumberland County Council setting up the 'Northumberland Economic Corridor' to "understand how rail could unlock a host of wider benefits for the region"<sup>145</sup>. It is therefore recommended that the management arrangements for the Exeter to Barnstaple route modernisation should also explicitly include a post-modernisation benefits management system emulating the best aspects of the Blueprint and any emerging lessons from the Northumberland Line.

#### *Management of sustainability*

Given that sustainability is a key objective of the scheme and may be a key factor in funding, it is important to include this in the management arrangements. The Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) has recently published its *Sustainable Rail Blueprint*<sup>146</sup>.

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<sup>142</sup> *The Magenta Book*, HM Treasury, 2011.

<sup>143</sup> *Dartmoor Line Early Impact Evaluation*, Department for Transport, March 2025:  
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d119dce65dc716bfb1dbbc/dartmoor-line-early-impact-evaluation.pdf>

<sup>144</sup> Scottish Borders Council: *BORDERS RAILWAY BLUEPRINT - UPDATE* Report by Corporate Transformation & Services Director EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE, 2 February 2016.

<sup>145</sup> Stuart McNaughton, Northumberland County Council Strategic Transport Manager quoted in *Modern Railways* magazine, March 2024.

<sup>146</sup> *Sustainable Rail Blueprint*, Rail Safety and Standard Boards, November 2023.

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This document follows the *Blueprint's* key recommendations. The RSSB explains that “The Sustainable Rail Blueprint (The *Blueprint*) is the industry-wide framework for realising sustainable rail. It’s rail’s first unified plan, providing a whole-industry view as far as 2050.” The *Blueprint* includes the adjacent summary diagram:

### Executive Summary

#### The Sustainable Rail Blueprint is the industry-wide blueprint for realising sustainable rail.

Rail is embarking on transformation. The entire industry has come together to co-create the Blueprint. Its aim is to align efforts, inspire change, and make the railway even more sustainable.

Rail is already the most sustainable mode of long-distance transport for both people and goods. It is responsible for just 1.4% of the UK's transport carbon emissions.

Maximising rail's benefits can help our industry become the backbone of a green transport system and economy.

But we need all parts of the rail industry to rise to the challenge, changing the way we do business to deliver not just net zero, but sustainable benefits for the environment, our local communities and wider society.

The Blueprint presents the industry's view on “what” needs to be achieved, “how” to deliver it and “who” needs to make a contribution:

- The ‘What’: The Blueprint sets out 11 sustainable rail topics, across emissions, natural environment and social sustainability
- The ‘How’: The Blueprint presents 6 common solutions, identified as the primary enablers of sustainable rail
- The ‘Who’: The Blueprint explores the key roles played across the industry in delivering sustainable rail.



The Culture for Sustainability section of the *Blueprint* says that “making sustainability part of everything we do must be a core pillar of the culture of the rail industry.” The aim would be to ensure through the Steering Group set up to manage the scheme that Network Rail and Great Western Railway as train operator (and successors to those organisations under any rail reorganisation) took forward key elements of the sustainability strategy developed for the scheme.

A key sustainability factor is logistics for the construction phase of the modernisation scheme. The Strategic Case highlights that Barnstaple and Exeter already suffer from congestion. Large numbers of heavy trucks bringing ballast and other construction materials would run contrary to a key purpose of modernisation.

Rail-based logistics would be one solution. Some materials such as continuously welded rail can only in practice be delivered by rail. For ballast and other large-volume material requirements, a rail-based solution is an obvious solution too, with the additional benefit that rail freight is substantially greener than road-based freight. Modern rail construction techniques of the sort used on the Okehampton reopening mean rail-based material delivery could be undertaken from the route itself.

The similarities with the Mid Cornwall Metro mean that approaches used on that scheme would potentially be relevant too. For other materials such as spoil a rail logistics centre might be established at a suitable location on the route to receive materials for onward transport.

Further factors in sustainable construction include reducing ‘embedded carbon’ and sustainable construction techniques. Consideration should be given to how embedded carbon could be reduced, for example by reuse of old materials from elsewhere. Sustainable/low emission/low noise construction techniques include the use of electricity-powered rather than diesel-powered plant and machinery. Both are increasingly in use on non-rail projects and are starting to be used on rail.

### Statutory Duties

MH Treasury’s *Green Book*<sup>147</sup> sets out three statutory duties to be formally covered in appraisal and management of schemes:

- “Duty to have due regard to the environmental principles policy statement (EPPS): The Environment Act 2021 places a duty on Ministers of the Crown to have due regard to the EPPS when making policies. The EPPS sets out five environmental principles that ministers need to consider when making policy. Practitioners need to identify the potential environmental effects, either positive or negative, of options and apply the five principles as appropriate to inform the design of the proposal. The EPPS should be considered throughout the appraisal process, as the duty extends to making, developing, adopting, revising or repealing policy. Chapter 8 of the Green Book contains more information on assessing impacts on nature and greenhouse gas emissions.

<sup>147</sup> HM Treasury, 5 February 2026:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The\\_Green\\_Book\\_2026.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6984ac702df808759a7bd740/The_Green_Book_2026.pdf)

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- Biodiversity duty: The biodiversity duty requires public authorities in England to consider what they can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Defra has produced guidance on complying with the biodiversity duty.
- Public sector equality duty (PSED): The PSED requires decision makers to have due regard to the need to eliminate conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations for those sharing protected characteristics. The general duty ensures that public authorities consider how their functions will affect people with different protected characteristics. Practitioners should assess whether those sharing such characteristics would be expected to be differentially impacted compared to the general population by different options and whether the identified impacts would make a difference to the assessment of those options. Where there are negative impacts, practitioners should consider whether there is scope for mitigating those impacts.”

A fuller appraisal of each requires specialist input and is beyond the scope of this early document. It is noted that many rail schemes typically score positively or at least neutrally on all three areas. If negative outcomes are noted, for example the potential negative impact of infrastructure works on adjacent biodiversity, appropriate responses would need to be developed as the business case progresses.

#### *Delivery programme and project resourcing*

It is too early in the scheme’s development to produce a detailed delivery programme, not least because no formal views have yet been taken on the overall scope of deliverables. That will be a task for those managing the scheme and writing later business cases to develop, including in the light of the approach taken by the Tavistock project (its SOBC says relatively little about the expected structure of the delivery programme). However, even at this early stage, the following can be said:

- Network Rail will play a key role throughout and will take on final delivery if the models adopted by the Tavistock and Mid Cornwall Metro schemes are followed. Network Rail manages large numbers of different types of rail investment projects. It does so through its internally mandated and highly developed project delivery models and systems, implemented by staff trained and experienced in the application of those models and systems;
- Network Rail is best placed to lead the definition of the ‘Minimum Viable Product’ and any ‘Value Engineering’ processes that may be necessary during the detailed design phase;
- After implementing Project SPEED<sup>148</sup> in 2020, Network Rail has moved to its new PACE<sup>149</sup> delivery model to avoid the inflexibility of its earlier GRIP<sup>150</sup> model. PACE was used in the successful and, compared to many rail schemes, rapid implementation of the Okehampton reopening project, so is relevant to a scheme such as Barnstaple route modernisation (the Department for Transport’s evaluation of that scheme credits the use of Project SPEED as being a key factor in allowing the project to be delivered efficiently and below predicted cost); and
- PACE has the following stages, albeit capable of more flexible deployment as described by Network Rail above than the simple linear listing below might imply:
  - Project initiation;
  - Development and project selection;
  - Project design;
  - Project delivery; and
  - Project close.

#### *Management of scope: ‘gold-plating’ of specification and ‘scope creep’*

One accusation often pitched at public sector and railway projects in particular is that they are ‘gold-plated’. It is argued that they cost far more than they should because too many elements of scope are included in their specification and that significant elements of scope are added subsequently to allay local objections (‘scope creep’). This has been a particular accusation made of the HS2 project. A particular risk is when commitment to a scheme is made too early and subsequent scope creep increases costs far beyond initially estimated levels.

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<sup>148</sup> Network Rail: “SPEED (Swift, Pragmatic and Efficient Enhancement Delivery) has two core principles at its heart – to halve the time and slash the cost of project delivery, helping us provide a better service for passengers and freight users.”

<sup>149</sup> Project Acceleration in a Controlled Environment.

<sup>150</sup> <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/industry-and-commercial/supply-chain/existing-suppliers/rail-speed/>

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The Secretary of State's 6-monthly report to Parliament on the HS2 project<sup>151</sup> reflects the work being undertaken by the project's new Chief Executive to undertake a comprehensive 'reset' of the project: "HS2 has suffered from repeated cost increases and delays for too long. Although there have been external factors outside of the programme's control, it has also been mismanaged. It is now clear that cost estimates were overly optimistic and the programme moved to construction too quickly when designs were still immature." It will therefore be critical to ensure the management arrangements for the scheme fully take account of the learning from projects such as HS2 to prevent scope creep and other damaging project management failures.

In a scheme such as the one described in this document, there may be some apparent exceptions to the rules on good project governance to prevent scope creep. Several elements of the overall vision have no connections in project governance terms and could be implemented before decisions on the most costly engineering elements of scope are decided (those covering track, earth works/bridges, signalling, station platforms/bridges). For example, wi-fi at stations, EV charging or pay-as-you-go ticketing could be decided on separately.

As explained in the Foreword, this document aims to form a sober assessment. The Management Case describes how Network Rail involvement could help define the 'minimum viable product'. The management arrangements described in the Management Case could decide to descope items or seek alternative funding or different construction phasing if it was felt that such items or others were excessive or if cost pressures during further development of the scheme meant they had to be reviewed to bring scheme cost down.

However, the key is to ensure that value for money is achieved. That is not necessarily the same as the cheapest scheme or the one with the lowest specification that might not meet future needs optimally, for example by providing no springboard for further improvement. The National Audit Office defines 'value for money' as "the optimal use of resources (economy, efficiency and effectiveness) to achieve the intended outcomes"<sup>152</sup>. These terms are further defined as:

- "Economy: minimising the cost of resources used or required (inputs) – spending less;
- Efficiency: the relationship between the output from goods or services and the resources to produce them – spending well; and
- Effectiveness: the relationship between the intended and actual results of public spending (outcomes) – spending wisely."

#### *Management of relationships with other schemes – portfolio management*

The *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>153</sup> establishes a wider programme of transport improvement proposals and ultimately projects, within which rail projects are one element among several. Within that programme, a key issue for the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority is establishing priorities and managing any competition for funding and other resources which might emerge. A further question at this portfolio level is the extent to which individual schemes might work best in combination with others: so-called 'synergy effects'.

Five complementary schemes with potential synergies with the scheme in this document have been identified:

- New trains;
- Improved digital connectivity;
- Digital ticketing;
- Reinstatement of train services between Barnstaple and Bideford; and
- Extension of Barnstaple line train services beyond Exeter Central as part of an 'Exeter Metro'.

Of these five schemes, new trains, improved digital connectivity and digital ticketing are integral to the wider vision for the modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route set out in this document. Reinstatement of train services between Barnstaple and Bideford and the extension of Barnstaple line train services beyond Exeter Central as part of an Exeter Metro concept are not presented as integral parts of that vision, but would have the potential to strengthen the benefits offered by modernisation of the Barnstaple line and to drive passenger usage yet further.

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<sup>151</sup> Rt Hon Heidi Alexander MP, 17 July 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hs2-6-monthly-report-to-parliament-july-2025>

<sup>152</sup> *Successful Commissioning Toolkit*, National Audit Office: <https://www.nao.org.uk/successful-commissioning/>

<sup>153</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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#### *Portfolio management – new trains*

As part of a separate, complementary scheme, GWR is reviewing options for replacing the older diesel multiple unit trains (DMU) of three classes that currently operate secondary and branch line services in the South West as part of a wider replacement of its older DMUs ('Green Railway for Growth' – previously called 'Project Churchward'). Given the importance of new trains in providing or contributing to many of the benefits of the Exeter to Barnstaple line modernisation scheme, it will be critical for the management of the two schemes to be closely aligned with each other.

The new trains are critical for the overall success of the Barnstaple scheme, but the new trains scheme has a far wider geographical remit, covering all parts of the GWR operational area where the older diesel multiple unit trains remain in operation. A key task will be to maximise the synergistic effects while minimising dependencies and downside risks that they drive. Physical infrastructure and rolling stock projects have very different risk drivers. Many elements of the scheme sketched in this document would bring benefits without changes to the train fleet (for example, station upgrades), while others (for example, track upgrades) would bring some benefits without new trains while bringing the maximum benefit in combination.

It is understood from GWR that its preference is for its older DMU fleet to be replaced by a fleet of new battery trains. GWR's experience with an experimental battery train on the Greenford branch have been published in a white paper: *Fast-charge battery technology: A viable option for regional rail?*<sup>154</sup>. GWR Managing Director Mark Hopwood says in the Foreword: "We've shown that the technology works" and that such trains could have substantial cost and reliability benefits over the old diesel trains they replace. The Executive Summary concludes: "These tools give GWR confidence that fast-charge battery trains could help deliver services across branch lines in the Thames Valley and in Devon and Cornwall, including the long line from Exeter to Barnstaple." The concept involves short sections of electrification in the Exeter area.

Electric trains typically achieve far higher levels of acceleration than is possible with most diesel trains, something that is of particular importance to a scheme such as this where journey time saving is a key objective.

Under the current industry structure, the procurement and bringing into service of new trains is a matter for train operators: GWR in this case. Under current plans train operators will be integrated into a single organisation managing both infrastructure and train services. The scheme management arrangements will therefore need explicitly take account of these planned changes.

#### *Portfolio management – improved digital connectivity and digital ticketing*

Two elements of the digital improvement outcomes recommended are also almost certain to involve portfolio management challenges: improved wireless connectivity and digital ticketing.

Improved wireless connectivity would need careful coordination as part of a wider scheme beyond the Barnstaple route alone. If undertaken as part of the Project Reach<sup>155</sup> public-private partnership involving Network Rail, it would be a small part of the a much larger national scheme. If undertaken more locally emulating the Scottish approach of fitting Starlink 4G/5G satellite equipment to the trains, a portfolio management approach would still be needed, as the trains used on the Barnstaple line are (and are likely to continue to be) used on other lines in the South West, so a large fleet-wide approach to fitting the equipment would be needed.

Digital ticketing would in project terms be feasible to implement on the Barnstaple route alone, but that would make little commercial sense, as digital ticketing schemes have been shown across the country to have the best take-up when implemented across a wider area. London and areas beyond are the key example, but in Cornwall digital ticketing has been implemented in two area tranches rather than on a route-by-route basis. For the Barnstaple line, off-route destinations are important, with Digby & Sowton on the Exmouth line being a key destination, for example.

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<sup>154</sup> <https://www.gwr.com/-/media/gwr-sc-website/files/about-gwr/what-you-can-expect/sustainability/GWR-fast-charge-whitepaper-010725.pdf>

<sup>155</sup> 26 June 2025: "a public-private partnership between Network Rail and telecoms companies Neos Networks and Freshwave "to kickstart economic growth with ultra fast fibre optic cable across 1,000 kilometres of major rail lines.": <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/on-track-and-online-landmark-deal-dead-zones>

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#### *Portfolio Management: Reinstatement of train services beyond Barnstaple to Bideford*

For the Exeter to Barnstaple route modernisation scheme, a key synergy is with the scheme to reinstate train services between Barnstaple and Bideford. The new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>156</sup> says that: “We will also work with partners and support ongoing feasibility work for the potential extension of the North Devon Line to Bideford.”

As explored in the separate business case being developed for that scheme, the overall journey time between Bideford and Exeter and the benefits of the train service reinstatement scheme depends substantially on better journey times being achieved between Exeter and Barnstaple in order to improve competitiveness with car-based journeys in particular. While these are two separate schemes, having different objectives, potentially different types of funding source and different technical and commercial challenges, each could support the other in achieving a jointly better overall outcome:

- Extending the existing line beyond Barnstaple to Bideford would increase the overall number of passengers and therefore revenue using the whole line through improving accessibility of the train services to new catchment areas, in particular potential users who currently use cars for their journeys;
- Improving journey time between Exeter and Barnstaple would maximise usage and therefore wider social benefit on a reinstated Bideford line and hence ticket sale income, including through improving the attractiveness of the route for passengers wishing to make through journeys to or from London and other parts of Britain;
- Increased capacity through more frequent, longer trains would address both current crowding and the capacity needs driven by the rapid increases in usage already seen;
- The extended layover at Bideford would have potentially substantial operational performance benefits, in particular increasing the mostly very tight turn-round times currently in place at Barnstaple station; and
- New, more environmentally friendly trains would be essential for the reinstatement of train services along an environmentally sensitive corridor between Barnstaple and Bideford.

The challenges include how funding might be achieved and, perhaps most importantly if both schemes were to be adopted by the Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority, ensuring that each one took account of the other. That is too important a point to be left to softer programme management at and may be best achieved by ensuring that the scheme management arrangements for each scheme included a specific requirement to consider the needs of the other scheme. In particular each scheme would need to consider what it needed to do in terms of scope definition to ensure overall success if they were implemented in sequence rather than simultaneously.

Potentially relevant approaches include ‘passive provision’ in physical design and early consideration of how train service timetable structures would work under both schemes. By way of illustrative example, in the case of passive provision, if the Exeter to Barnstaple scheme came first, it might conclude that no passing place was needed at Barnstaple, but the train service timetable study might show it was needed for Bideford, in which case any design decisions in relation to Barnstaple station area would not fund or build the passing place, but would ensure that nothing was done which made it more difficult or costly such as extending the station car park across the former railway alignment.

#### *Portfolio management – increasing frequency of train services across central Exeter*

An increase in frequency of the service across the city to Digby & Sowton from two trains an hour to four is included in the new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>157</sup>. This says: “The ‘Devon Metro’ rail network will be made more attractive by improving connectivity between Exeter and surrounding towns. The aspirations include: ... A 15-minute rail frequency between Exeter Central and Digby & Sowton stations delivered by extending the Barnstaple service route across Exeter.” Also included is an aspiration for a new station at Monkerton on the section of route between Polsloe Bridge and Digby & Sowton serving work destinations and housing in eastern Exeter.

Increasing the frequency of train services on the Exeter to Barnstaple line would both be compatible with such a ‘metro’ frequency of service and could provide the train services to deliver it on top of the existing service between Exeter and Exmouth. In particular, if it proved difficult without additional infrastructure to turn

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<sup>156</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>157</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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additional trains from Barnstaple at Exeter Central, it could provide a useful turn-round point for those services, rather than terminating them at the less convenient Exeter St Davids.

However, a 'metro' scheme is itself likely to need substantial investment over and above anything spent on the Barnstaple line and would largely address different objectives. Those facts and the other matters discussed in this section suggest that an Exeter 'metro' scheme is separate from, but complementary to, the Exeter to Barnstaple line modernisation scheme. That said, if funding could be found to progress both schemes, they could help reinforce each other's business cases, in particular the Barnstaple line scheme, which would benefit from an increase in important destinations served by direct train services.

#### *Management of statutory and other consents*

Public railways in the United Kingdom have normally been constructed under special legal powers that among other things allow compulsory purchase of land, permit roads and other rights of way to be closed or altered and give certain protections against actions for nuisance. At this stage of development of the business case and given the scope of interventions so far identified, it is assumed that any works could be undertaken under the permitted development rights deriving from the underlying legislation originally promoting the route. As the business case develops, further technical and legal analysis would be necessary to establish whether in fact further powers would be necessary and, if so, what the best route to obtaining them would be. This is an important step that must not be omitted, as acquiring additional powers is both lengthy and costly.

Should it emerge from further analysis that further powers would in fact be necessary, a decision would need to be made at that stage whether the relevant element of the scheme involved should continue within the overall programme or whether a different approach should be taken to avoid the need for additional legal powers.

A wider programme of engagement will need to be developed and implemented as the business case develops, including in connection with the drafting, assessment of responses to and development of approaches to implementing the findings of relevant impact assessments, including the Environmental Impact Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment or by any other form of consents or permissions not so far discussed in this section. Failure to identify a necessary consent[s] could have a material impact on both timescale and costs.

#### *Management of risk*

The International Standards Organisation defines risk as: 'effect of uncertainty on objectives'. Given the large number of elements and variables in a large scheme such as a rail modernisation scheme and the fact that it plays out over an extended period of time means that careful management of risk is essential.

The proposed scheme management arrangements described above and the Network Rail PACE delivery model put sharp focus on the sorts of variability compared to expected outcome that is central to risk management. Among the specific risk management tools used in schemes of this sort, a risk register is usual. At this early stage the risk register cannot aim to capture all risks, as the nature of risk is that it is something that is not easily anticipatable. Nevertheless, a risk register provides a standard method for collating identified risks and ensuring that the management of the scheme addresses them.

The following initial risk register has been constructed on a qualitative basis based on:

- Issues identified in this document;
- Issues identified in the Tavistock reopening SOBC;
- More general issues identified by the author from his experience with projects; and
- Early stage round-table discussions held with GWR and Network Rail as part of the regular monthly meetings with those organisations described elsewhere in this Management Case.

The risk register has been constructed with a clear view to the scheme objectives as set out in the Strategic Case. The risks are not put in a particular order for emphasis and no conclusions should be drawn from their position in the table.

Risk Register			
Risk Descriptor	Impact	Probability	Mitigation
One or more scheme objectives cannot be met because close adherence to rail industry standards results in excessive cost	High	Medium	- Learn lessons from other schemes, for example the innovative way in which rail and highway standards were used

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/ low value for money compared to the funding available, with one or more interventions not taken forward, for example passenger lifts being deemed necessary at lower usage stations			<p>where appropriate to create a fully accessible new station at Marsh Barton</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep this risk as a key matter for review by the scheme management arrangements, including using techniques such as Network Rail's Minimum Viable Product approach</li> </ul>
Trains are overcrowded because of underestimation of likely passenger numbers and it is not possible to run longer trains on the existing route to Barnstaple resulting in objectives not being met	High	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learn lessons from other schemes, including Okehampton and the Northumberland Line (higher passenger numbers experienced than forecast)</li> <li>- Careful consideration of relevant technical issues such as Trip Rate v Trip Diversion modelling</li> <li>- Ensure that a separately funded and implemented Bideford train service reinstatement scheme is factored into capacity calculations and scheme design</li> </ul>
Rail-specific funding sources such as RNEP dry up, so the Barnstaple route modernisation scheme cannot progress and meet its objectives	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Explore all alternative sources of funding</li> <li>- Make the case that the economic indicators mean Barnstaple should be a priority</li> </ul>
Construction costs exceed forecasts due to continuing high inflation in the construction sector (both before and after scheme commencement) so the scheme cannot progress and meet its objectives	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure sufficient contingency and optimism bias is applied to initial estimates, even if they initially make the scheme seem less attractive</li> <li>- Explore contracting options to reduce risk to the promoter/funder</li> </ul>
Construction costs exceed forecasts due to continuing high inflation in the construction sector (both before and after scheme commencement) put scheme objectives at risk	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Apply previously identified descoping options</li> <li>- Seek alternative sources of funding</li> <li>- Review priorities within the overall DCC programme of schemes</li> </ul>
The planned shorter journey times, improved operational performance, higher capacity, greater comfort, better accessibility and greater environmental friendliness elements of the scheme are not achieved or are only partly achieved because modern rolling stock such as battery or alternative power trains does not become available to GWR, for example because the London-focused elements of a combined GWR-SWR-Chiltern procurement are deemed to have a stronger case	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Portfolio management seeks to maximise synergies and minimise dependencies</li> <li>- Lobby GWR and central Government/ any new central body under the Rail Review emphasising the importance of the West of England element of the GWR DMU replacement scheme</li> </ul>
Loss of key personnel, capability and focus at Network Rail and/or GWR due to organisational changes under the Rail Review	High	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep developments in resources available to the scheme under review</li> <li>- Review ways of keeping key staff</li> </ul>
Network Rail deprioritises work on the Barnstaple route because of competing priorities elsewhere on the national rail network	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Keep Network Rail engaged throughout the development of the business case</li> <li>- Lobby Network Rail senior management through their NDRDA membership</li> <li>- If a financial issues, consider other ways of securing the necessary contributions</li> </ul>
Additional or new car parking at stations cannot be constructed at a location a reasonable distance from the station because private land owners, including of former railway land are not willing to sell or lease land	Medium	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure all options for acquiring land are fully explored with the landowners, not just sale</li> <li>- Ensure car parking expansion is clearly prioritised to avoid several negotiations being necessary simultaneously</li> </ul>

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The working assumption that any modernisation works can be undertaken within existing permitted development rights is shown by further legal analysis to be incorrect	High	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Review programme scope and decide whether any items not deliverable within existing permitted development rights are essential and whether a different approach could be taken</li> <li>- If they are essential, develop a revised programme schedule taking account of the timescales for a Development Consent Order and/or other relevant permissions</li> </ul>
The proposed increase in train services is not permitted by Network Rail because one or more of the level and other crossings fail safety risk assessments with the longer period of closure for train movements	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure the risk is addressed at an early stage of operational analysis</li> <li>- If the risk crystallises, review mitigation options as part of the scheme development</li> </ul>

#### *Stakeholder engagement management*

Although at an early stage, the Exeter to Barnstaple route modernisation scheme already has an organised approach to stakeholder engagement. It is anticipated that this will continue to develop through the management arrangements described in this Management Case.

With growing local interest in the importance of the railway to Northern Devon, including as a result of the campaign to reopen the line to Bideford, the TRA and Railfuture initiated the concept of a new Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) in 2023 as a forum for representatives of local, regional and national stakeholder organisations. The NDRDA promotes both the reinstatement of train services to Bideford and the modernisation of the Exeter to Barnstaple rail route.

Bideford Town Council formally became the founder member of the NDRDA in December 2023, followed by Railfuture and the Tarka Rail Association (now North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group), then Barnstaple Town Council in January 2024, Northam Town Council in February 2024, followed by Torridge District Council in April 2024. An inaugural event was held at the Royal Hotel in Bideford on 1 March 2024 with wide senior level representation from the public and private sectors and the rail industry established a model for an annual Alliance forum of stakeholder organisation leaders. A copy of the leaflet for the inaugural meeting including a list of invited parties and resolutions of support from local authorities can be found in Annex D.

At the inaugural event letters of support from both local MPs (Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP for Torridge and West Devon and Selaine Saxby MP for North Devon) and from the Devon County Council Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport (Cllr Andrea Davis) were read out, as all three had prior diary commitments (copies of the letters in Annex E). Statements of support were also made by a number of others, including Bideford Mayor Cllr Jamie McKenzie, Barnstaple Mayor Cllr Louisa York, South West Business Council CEO Paul Coles, Harland & Wolff (now Navantis) General Manager Tom Hart, Network Rail Western Route Director Marcus Jones BEM, Network Rail Programme Director Restoring Your Railway Mike Smith and GWR Head of Strategic Service Development Matt Barnes.

More formal consultation with the wider public will be necessary as the scheme develops and consensus is reached by the sponsoring body with input from stakeholders. Such consultation would be undertaken following local authority consultation good practice. Should it become clear that an application for additional statutory consents is needed such consultation would be an essential component of the work needed.

A wider programme of engagement will need to be developed and implemented as the business case develops, including in connection with the drafting, assessment of responses to and development of approaches to implementing the findings of relevant impact assessments, including the Environmental Impact Assessment and Equality Impact Assessment.

During implementation of the scheme, good practice from other schemes shows that targeted engagement will be important to ensure the benefits of the scheme are understood and to ensure that as the scheme approaches completion safety aspects are fully covered, including that any informal access to the future alignment is controlled for safety reasons.

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### Annex A

#### Options for Illustrative Early Stage of Development of the Exeter to Barnstaple Rail Route Programme of Modernisation

The Strategic Case identifies the following outcomes:

- The Exeter-Barnstaple rail route provides an important contribution to improved sustainability of transport connectivity for Northern Devon, Mid Devon and Exeter;
- Materially faster typical journey times, with a fastest journey between Barnstaple and Exeter St Davids of no more than 54 minutes (Exeter Central typically 60 minutes), with potential further material journey time savings: significantly better than any bus journey time and competitive with variable and often unpredictable car journey times;
- Train service frequency doubled from hourly to two trains per hour between Barnstaple and Exeter (three trains per hour for Crediton);
- Very substantial increases in the numbers of passengers and revenue resulting from the combined effect of increasing frequency and reducing journey times;
- Reduced frequency and length of line closures due to bridge scour risks or track/other infrastructure damage following heavy rainfall with an ultimate goal of full route resilience to such events;
- Train service capacity substantially increased, both for continuing growth on the Barnstaple-Exeter route and for any reinstatement of train services to Bideford;
- Modern, faster accelerating, more reliable, higher capacity, more accessible, more comfortable, more environmentally-friendly trains replace diesel trains on the line;
- Intermediate stations easier and safer to access and use by car/EV and active travel modes, including for disabled people; and
- Stations and the train service brought into the digital age with wi-fi where not present, better mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route and digital ticketing.

This vision and outcomes are supported by the following illustrative improvement interventions, subject to further engineering, operational and economic review as the business case progresses. The list is not all-or-nothing: elements could be chosen depending on funding available and priorities, including a potential phased implementation over time, with elements prioritised for earlier or later implementation on the basis of a combination of cost and funding availability.

#### *Modernising the railway infrastructure*

- Raising line speeds at places where higher permitted maximum speeds could in practice be used to reduce journey times;
- Replacing all remaining sections of old jointed track with continuously welded rail;
- Creating a dynamic loop of around seven miles between Newton St Cyres and the former Coleford Junction by reinstating double track between Newton St Cyres and Crediton and installing new point work at the former Coleford Junction, thereby converting the parallel currently single lines from Crediton to Okehampton and Barnstaple into double track;
- Creating additional double track on the northern part of the route to allow trains to pass each other, subject to further engineering and operational study;
- Reinstating the second platform at Yeoford on the new double track section, where possible reusing old platform structures and avoiding lifts unless absolutely necessary;
- Modernising crossing control and signalling systems;
- Using modern monitoring technology to improve the resilience of the line's bridges to closures due to scour risks; and
- Changing station request stop status: removal of request stop status at more heavily used stations and station stop kiosks installed at less-used stations to reduce journey time-delaying speed reductions at those stations.

#### *Introducing modern trains*

- As part of separate, complementary scheme, replacing diesel trains on the route with modern trains offering:
  - Shorter journey times through much higher acceleration;

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- Greater reliability;
- Selective door opening to achieve greater capacity without costly platform lengthening;
- More comfort for passengers;
- Ideally level boarding for improved accessibility; and
- Greater environmental friendliness, including lower noise levels.

#### *Improving the usability and accessibility of the stations*

- Improving selected station car parks to good modern standards;
- Enlarging existing station car parks at key stations;
- Installing electric vehicle chargers at all stations with formal car parks;
- Installing ticket machines at larger, higher use stations, and pay-as-you-go;
- Installing wi-fi at stations without it and improving mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route;
- Creating improved, safer access to intermediate stations for pedestrians and other users; and
- Improving road layouts at key level crossings for the safety of road and rail users.

The table below assesses the improvement options against the outcome options. In the same way as the assessment table in the Strategic Case, it uses RAGG ratings recommended by the Department for Transport:

- Red (R): the option opposes or creates tension with achieving the outcome;
- Amber (A): the option has a minimal impact or has a small contribution to achieving the outcome;
- Green (G): the option has a strong fit to contributing to achieving the outcome;
- Grey (GY): the option has no impact on achieving the outcome or is irrelevant.

An asterisk [\*] has been added to show where an improvement option is particularly central to the achievement of an outcome option.

Assessment of Illustrative Options for Improvement Against Outcome Options							
Options	Outcomes						
Descriptor	Improved punctuality / reliability	Faster typical journey times	Train service frequency doubled	Capacity increased	Stations easier & safer to use /access	Stations & trains brought into digital age	Trains more comfortable, more environmentally-friendly
1) Raising line speeds	A	G*	A	GY	GY	GY	GY
2) Replacing all old jointed track	A	G	A	GY	GY	GY	A
3) Creating a dynamic loop Newton St Cyres to Coleford Jct	G*	G	G*	G	GY	GY	GY
4) Creating additional double track on the northern part of route	G*	G	G*	G	GY	GY	GY
5) Reinstating second platform at Yeoford	G	G	G	G	GY	GY	GY
6) Modernising crossing control and signalling systems	G*	G*	G*	G	GY	GY	GY
7) Using modern monitoring technology to improve the resilience of the line's bridges to closures due to scour risks	G*	G	G	G	GY	GY	GY
8) Changing station request stop status	G*	G	G	GY	A	GY	GY
9) Replacing diesel trains on the route	G*	G*	A	G	A	GY	G*
10) Improving selected station car parks	GY	GY	A	GY	G*	GY	GY

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11) Enlarging existing station car parks at key stations	GY	GY	A	A	G*	GY	GY
12) Installing electric vehicle chargers at all stations with formal car parks	GY	GY	GY	GY	G*	GY	GY
13) Installing ticket machines at higher use stations and pay-as-you-go	GY	GY	GY	GY	G	G*	GY
14) Installing wi-fi at stations without it and improving mobile connectivity/wi-fi along the route	GY	GY	GY	GY	G	G*	GY
15) Creating improved, safer access at intermediate stations	A	GY	GY	GY	G*	GY	GY
16) Improving road layouts at key level crossings	GY	G	A	GY	G	GY	GY

#### *Emerging view on the overall scope of infrastructure interventions*

Before the interventions are described individually, a word is needed about the most likely combination of infrastructure interventions. This is needed because, while the stations/accessibility interventions are highly scalable, the same is not true of the interventions needed to modernise the railway infrastructure. Ultimately, as explained elsewhere, economic, engineering and operability studies will be needed as the business case develops to inform decisions about what is the 'minimum viable product'.

Many stations/accessibility interventions could be implemented separately and in smaller or larger numbers and still give benefits to users and contribute to achievement of the relevant objectives. In contrast, it is not feasible, for example, to introduce additional passing places to facilitate an increase in the frequency of the train service without also modernising the signalling system and in some cases having to rebuild a second platform at stations. Equally, improvements to maximum permitted line speeds or introducing new, faster accelerating trains would not reduce journey times unless additional train passing capability was introduced. The many years that have passed with relatively little work being done on the line means that meaningful modernisation outside the stations needs a large step change in the capability of the infrastructure with a concomitantly large price tag.

At this early stage of business case development in advance of the specialist studies, it would be premature to attempt to eliminate options. The analysis in the table above suggests that all of the first seven infrastructure interventions would be needed to achieve scheme objectives. The following analysis suggests it is difficult to see how acceptable levels of operational performance and other scheme objectives could be met without full implementation:

- As explained elsewhere, good operational performance is a fundamental feature of railway that meets its passengers' expectations and maximises financial and social benefit;
- In the very longest term, all jointed track will be replaced by continuously welded rail as it wears out, as it is outdated technology, so the scheme proposal is for acceleration of renewals;
- The very widely different levels of performance of the Barnstaple and Okehampton routes, which share infrastructure between Exeter and Crediton suggests very strongly that it is the limited passing capability on the line north of Crediton and excessively tight Barnstaple turn-round times that are responsible for much of the difference (some severe weather events too), which in turn suggests that solely providing improved passing capability with a dynamic loop created by reinstating Coleford Junction is likely to be insufficient to improve performance materially, even if it is helpful;
- If the passing places issue is addressed for performance reasons, provided the passing places are correctly placed to enable such a timetable, it would be possible in principle to increase frequency of train services from one to two per hour; and

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- There could be a number of options for such train service increases: for example, depending on the financial situation, a full daily 2 TPH service from day one, or at a later stage with performance improvement prioritised initially, or focused initially on the busiest times of the day.

#### 1) Raising line speeds to reduce journey times

On the Exeter to Barnstaple line there are a number of different factors which reduce train speeds and result in the slow overall journey times for the distance involved:

- The overall low permitted maximum speeds (nowhere above 70 mph);
- The station stopping patterns and low acceleration rates of the existing classes of train used mean the maximum permitted speeds are often in practice not reached;
- The multiplicity of changes to maximum speed restrictions, with significant proportions of the route at much lower maximum permitted speeds than the highest of 70 mph;
- The very low maximum permitted speeds on point work;
- The large number of level and other crossings, many with poor sight lines for crossing users and/or poor configuration of the roads crossing the railway, requiring trains to slow or to come to a complete stop such as at Eggesford;
- The requirement for trains to stop to collect the single line token at Crediton after and before leaving/calling at the station and similar requirements at Eggesford;
- The large number of intermediate stations called at;
- The need to slow for request stop stations even if no passengers wish to board or alight; and
- The older diesel trains currently in use have lower acceleration than modern trains, reducing their ability to attain higher permitted line speeds quickly after traversing slower sections of network.

A maximum permitted line speed of 70 mph seems low nowadays when even normal electric commuter trains can reach 110 mph and 125 mph is the normal top speed for main line longer-distance trains. However, it was historically a high speed for steam locomotives and early diesel locomotives/diesel multiple units and would therefore have been a satisfactory speed for the main line which the route was historically. However, the ‘patch and repair’ approach adopted over many years with little active investment other than replacement of jointed track and safety improvements in particular at crossings means that such speed limits are increasingly anachronistic unless determined by fundamentals of track geometry such as the curvature imposed by the route alignment.

Route Section	Maximum Permitted Speeds (mph)
Cowley Bridge Junction to Newton St Cyres	20 (points), 40, 60, 70
Newton St Cyres to Crediton	40, 15 (points)
Crediton to Yeoford	40, 15 (points), 30/40, 30/70, 20/40
Yeoford to Copplestone	30/70
Copplestone to Morchard Road	30/70
Morchard Road to Lapford	30/55
Lapford to Eggesford	30/55, 15 (points)
Eggesford to Kings Nympton	15 (points), 30/55, 30/50
Kings Nympton to Portsmouth Arms	30/55
Portsmouth Arms to Umberleigh	30/55, 30/35
Umberleigh to Chapelton	30/60
Chapelton to Barnstaple	30/60, 20 (station approach)

The adjacent table (author) shows the current maximum permitted speed limits on the Exeter to Barnstaple route taken from the Network Rail *Sectional Appendix*. ‘30/40’ and similar means that the maximum permitted speed for locomotive-hauled trains (now never used other than for occasional maintenance purposes) is 30 mph and 40 mph for multiple units such as the diesel trains currently used on the route.

Discussions with current and former Network Rail and GWR employees suggest that the historic reasons behind some of the permanent speed restrictions on the route may not be fully understood. On this basis, a review is recommended of all permanent speed restrictions on the route to establish whether they are justified in the light of the track geometry and more recent improvements to the track, civil engineering features and crossings. If higher speeds could be allowed, the review should establish what the inherent maximum safe speed would be given the track geometry and factors affecting crossing safety such as train driver and crossing user sight lines. A pragmatic view would need to be taken to avoid a situation where in practice unusable short sections of higher speed obtruded into an otherwise even maximum speed profile.

If such changes to permanent speed restrictions were found to be possible, they could in principle be realised at relatively low cost through the regulated Network Change process, the replacement of relevant trackside signage, updating the *Sectional Appendix*/other relevant documentation and rebriefing of GWR drivers.

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Even if no wider investment scheme were implemented to add or upgrade passing places, every additional minute that could be found from quicker journey times on the northern section between Eggesford and Barnstaple would have a doubly beneficial effect on route performance:

- Each minute saved per direction would result in a two minute turn-round time improvement, both reducing the number of trains arriving and departing late and reducing the delay on those that did arrive or depart late; and
- Every train from Exeter could arrive one minute earlier at Barnstaple and depart one minute later, creating a journey time saving that would result in improved revenue for the route.

A further factor for consideration is how the existing and any new maximum permitted speed limits could best be used to reduce journey times if combined with improvements to passing places/ additional double track and changes to train control/crossing arrangements. An operational study such as modelling or train running simulation would assist understanding of how the route speed profile could be put to best effect alongside the wider changes to the route. In particular, a two trains per hour timetable structure may enable higher speeds to be put to best effect to reduce journey times. New trains with higher acceleration are also likely to be able to make better use of higher permitted speeds and make better use of existing higher permitted speeds, as the maximum would be reached more quickly. That is the main way in which the Intercity Express Trains used on the GWR main line services have been able to materially reduce journey times.

Such studies could also investigate the extent to which any improvements to the current very low speeds at point work on the route could assist journey time improvements.

#### *2) Replacing all remaining sections of old jointed track with continuously welded rail*

In recent years Network Rail has replaced a number of sections of the remaining old jointed track with continuously welded rail (CWR). As well as allowing some temporary speed restrictions to be lifted, potentially allowing higher permanent speed limits for shorter journeys and reducing maintenance costs<sup>158</sup>, replacing jointed track with CWR results in a quieter and more comfortable ride for passengers.



The adjacent photo (author) shows a track joint and associated poor quality ballast bed at Crediton station.

The ambition is to ensure that all remaining sections of jointed track are replaced with CWR in a campaign of active replacement rather than waiting until it is no longer tenable to retain the jointed track, for example because performance-damaging temporary speed limits have to be introduced. The way the current configuration of the line inhibits faster line speeds because of the need for trains to pass each other at

Eggesford also reduces the imperative to replace jointed track earlier rather than later. As part of an overall modernisation aiming to achieve the lowest economically practicable journey times, however, full jointed track replacement makes more sense.

Normally, replacement of jointed track with CWR would be funded from the Network Rail Control Period renewals funding pot. That means the Barnstaple line would be in competition with other track renewals priorities across the country as a whole. A scheme funding pot specific to the Exeter to Barnstaple line would release that constraint. Some competition for design and implementation staff and materials would still remain.

It is noted that Network Rail's Wales & Western Managing Director Rob Cairns has made the following criticism<sup>159</sup> of current funding models: "Fixed railway infrastructure tends to be funded according to an asset's individual component age without reference to the system in which it sits and is based on what a component is and not what it does."

Sections of jointed track remain at the following locations:

- Between Newton St Cyres and Crediton;

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<sup>158</sup> The bolts and fishplates joining the short sections of rail need regular lubrication to ensure that the rails can expand and contract as temperatures rise and drop and inspection to ensure that fastenings remain in good order and are safe. The hammering action of wheels over the joints can also cause them to dip, which needs to be counteracted by adjusting ('tamping') the ballast bed.

<sup>159</sup> *Modern Railways* magazine, March 2025.

## EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

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- On the single Okehampton line between Crediton and the former Coleford Junction<sup>160</sup>;
- Between Copplestone and Morchard Road;
- Between Lapford and Eggesford; and
- Between Chapelton and Barnstaple.

#### 3) + 4) Creation of additional double track: general principles

Options 3) and 4) are separate because they have different emphasis within the scheme objectives. However, both propose increasing the amount of double track on the route.

In the early part of 2025, Network Rail had been successful in securing funding under strong competition with elsewhere in the Western Route to carry out a study to understand more about potential options. The study had the following elements:

- “Identify constraints on the location of new loops between Coleford and Barnstaple;
- Create designs for double track and associated station changes between Coleford and Newton St Cyres;
- Create designs for reinstating Coleford Junction;
- Assess the impact of line speed and infrastructure changes on level crossings;
- Options for the renewal of Eggesford level crossing; and
- Options for enhanced and efficient signalling of the line.”

In August 2025 Network Rail provided the following summary of the outcome of the study:

- “Additional passing loop provision, whilst viable, has numerous constraints that will result in varying degrees of complexity and/or cost to overcome, which will govern their optimal placement and length to suit the timetabled service;
- The twin track extension is viable between Crediton and Newton St Cyres in its entirety with no restriction to line speed, including a 70 mph turnout to the Exeter end of Newton St Cyres. A small line speed enhancement to 75 mph on this section would be possible, but would be at the limit of some geometry parameters. The initial design has double track extending a short way beyond Newton St Cyres station. A reduction of around 40 chains (805 metres) would move this crossover beyond the station and remove the need for a second platform. Further timetabling work will be needed to identify if this is feasible;
- Twin tracking and reconfiguring the Okehampton and Barnstaple lines as Up and Down lines to Coleford Junction is viable, with line speed increase on the Okehampton route to match that of the Barnstaple line (70 mph), subject to minor track works;
- Coleford Junction can be reinstated as a pair of high speed crossovers with no restriction to line speed, to continue either to Okehampton (40 mph) or Barnstaple (70 mph) on the respective single lines;
- Second platforms at Newton St Cyres and Yeoford are viable and options exist for their configuration to access Up and Down sides. Broader accessibility requirements have not been assessed at this stage;
- Options also exist for platform extensions at all other short station locations if required in the future, noting that modern trains with full selective door operation may not need these;
- Various user-worked level crossings would require upgrading. Potentially six would need upgrading due to the increase in train service, with 20 requiring attention if they become part of a double track section. Four more would require work if there was a line speed increase between Newton St Cyres and Coleford Junction. It is estimated that if all these changes were required, this would cost in the region of £6.5 million;
- Eggesford level crossing could be upgraded to a ‘Manually Controlled Barrier supervised by Obstacle Detection’ (MCB-OD). This would give a high level of protection while removing the Traincrew operation, which will reduce the journey time. Auto lower of the barriers is possible with barrier protection management, which would monitor blocking back from the adjacent road junction;
- The removal of token working is viable, which will reduce journey time, and has been considered in a phased manner. The high-level signalling infrastructure alterations required to enable this have been identified, involving eight new signals for the proposed two loops, plus six signals at Eggesford and 9 at Barnstaple if there is a requirement for double tracking at that end of the line; and

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<sup>160</sup> Originally to have been replaced as part of the track upgrade works associated with the reintroduction of train services to Okehampton, but deferred to Network Rail Control Period 7 (2024-2029).

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- Axle counters would provide train detection; this has potential to provide a safety benefit by giving the signaller greater visibility of where trains are than they have today, meaning better information can be given to those wishing to use occupation level crossings.

Next steps will be to get cost advice on the different interventions that are proposed, which can help inform development of a full Strategic Outline Business Case.”

Projects such as the redoubling schemes for the North and South Cotswold Lines show that it is important to establish general principles at an early stage in such schemes. The following general principles underpin the two sets of double track options set out here:

Projects such as the redoubling schemes for the North and South Cotswold Lines show that it is important to establish general principles at an early stage in such schemes. The following general principles underpin the two sets of double track options set out here:

- Double track is only reinstated or built where it is needed for the structure of train service and timetable proposed to achieve the scheme objectives. Where possible consistent with those objectives, more costly or difficult sections not needed to achieve scheme objectives are avoided. That means that new or reinstated double track will not always be in the same places as it was originally before a route was singled. Some track that was originally double might remain single and vice versa;
- On the North Cotswold Line redoubling, for example, the key objective was to improve operational performance, so only the double track sections needed for that purpose were reinstated. On the Exeter to Barnstaple line, key outcomes include better operational performance and higher track capacity to enable additional trains with shorter journey times;
- Not only is track redoubling expensive, but it is often less straightforward than many assume:
  - Redoubling track through stations requires platforms to be reinstated and lift bridges may need to be constructed where platforms are reinstated to ensure full accessibility in line with modern standards, in each case at significant capital on ongoing operating/repair cost;
  - Lift bridges also slow access to the platforms and inhibit access for those needing them if they fail. That means that lower cost alternatives, if possible, may not just be cheaper but also enable better service for passengers;
  - The remaining track is often not in the position of one of the original tracks, having been moved across the alignment to provide better curves or to reduce the impact on the track bed and engineering structures;
  - Placing new double track on embankments or other civil engineering structures such as bridges and culverts can result in a need to replace or reconstruct those features at high cost to ensure continued stability and maintainability;
  - Modern standards for cuttings and embankments require gentler earth gradients to ensure better long-term stability, which can result in additional land being needed outside the original route limits of deviation (the boundary between railway-owned land and privately-owned lineside land);
  - Reinstating double track through level and other public or private crossings can change the risk profile of the crossing and result in a need to upgrade protection given to crossing users and train services; and
  - Given the large number of intermediate stations and river bridges on the Exeter to Barnstaple route, both are to be avoided where possible. Further work will be necessary to understand the most affordable and best value for money options for track redoubling that achieve the scheme objectives. This principle is in line with the Network Rail concept of ‘minimum viable product’;
- For best affordability and value for money and to avoid the impact on project timescales of the need to acquire new statutory powers, all double track sections should use the existing alignment to remain within the permitted development rights under the original enabling legislation. That is facilitated by the fact that large sections of the Barnstaple route were either originally double track until singled by British Rail or land was acquired for further planned but not implemented track doubling in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the track was originally built to the wider Brunel broad gauge also means that there is a little more leeway than elsewhere;
- Subject to overall affordability constraints and other factors outlined in this section, a dynamic loop where trains can pass each other at full line speed is likely to be of greater benefit where key scheme objectives

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

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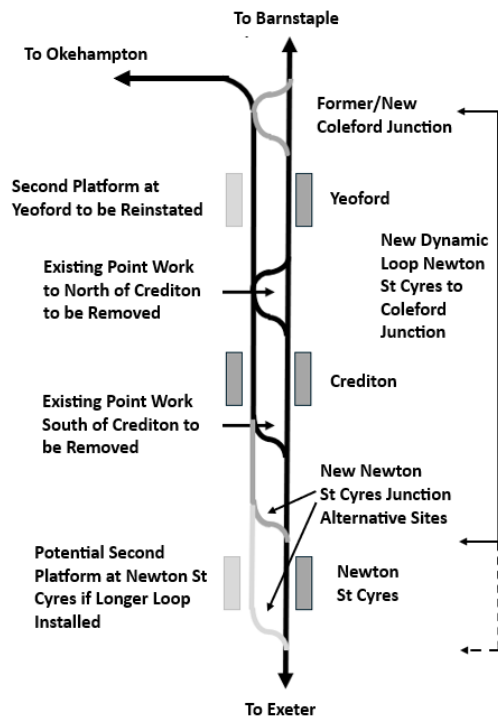
are to improve operational performance and reduce journey times than one or more short passing loops where trains need to come to a full stop; and

- New point work can have better maximum entry and exit speeds than apply to the older point work it replaces, which would help reduce journey times. For example, the maximum entry and exit speed across the point work to the south and north of Crediton and Eggesford stations is currently only 15 mph. The maximum speed on the curves on the approach to Barnstaple station remaining from the recovery of older point work is only 20 mph.

### 3) Creating a dynamic loop between Newton St Cyres and the former Coleford Junction

As described elsewhere in the document, the route suffers from poor performance and transmits it to other parts of the national network. The turn-back times at Barnstaple are in many cases very tight and the fact that trains need to cross in the short passing places at Crediton and Eggesford means there is very little opportunity to recover from delays on the route itself. Moreover, the current configuration of the track and other infrastructure means the route has reached its maximum train service frequency during current operating hours. There is no potential to increase the number of train services further.

The following sketch map (author: not to scale, new track and station platform in grey, light grey where the loop continues through Newton St Cyres station) showing how a dynamic loop could be created on the southern part of the route is based on initial work undertaken by Network Rail and GWR. It is intended to show



basic concepts and the layout of point work and other details would depend on further engineering and operability studies as the business case develops.

There are two tracks on the section between Crediton and the former Coleford Junction north of Yeoford. However, they are two bidirectional tracks not connected to each other north of Crediton and only usable by trains on the Okehampton and Barnstaple lines respectively.

If point work and a suitable signalling/train control system was installed at the former Coleford Junction north of Crediton and the double track at Crediton station was extended back south to Newton St Cyres (whether to the station or to the north of it), a new dynamic loop of around seven miles in length could be created. Whether the loop would need to include Newton St Cyres itself together with a reinstated second platform would depend on further engineering and operability studies.

A dynamic loop is a section of double track on an otherwise single track line of sufficient length to enable trains to pass each other at line speed. That means, for example, that an on-time train does not have to incur delay at a short passing place waiting for a delayed train coming in the other direction.

Equally an already delayed train does not have to incur further

delay waiting to pass an on-time train in the opposite direction.

The fact that trains can pass at line speed means that time is not lost through braking to a stop in the loop and accelerating out of it or traversing low speed point work into and out of the loop. A good example of a recently improved dynamic loop of similar length is on the Ebbw Vale line in Wales, where two miles of new track were installed to create a 7-mile dynamic loop to enable the introduction of a new through train service between Ebbw Vale and Newport in December 2023.

A dynamic loop at this location on the Exeter to Barnstaple line would have a potentially transformational effect on performance on the route, as it would allow much more flexible passing of Barnstaple and Okehampton trains than the inflexible Crediton-only passing arrangement currently in place. It would also form a core component of the route upgrade to enable a two trains per hour service for Barnstaple. It would also give greater flexibility in the ways in which the Okehampton and Barnstaple train services are timetabled.

However, even if the two trains per hour element of the scheme was not fundable or only fundable at a later date, the dynamic loop would be worth consideration for solely performance improvement purposes, as most

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of the track is already in place. If funding was tight, a further option could be initially only to install the new point work at the former Coleford Junction, which would still create a loop of considerable length.

If installation of the new point work and track was able to be coordinated with replacement of the old jointed track between Crediton and the former Coleford Junction that was deferred from the Okehampton line reopening scheme, that could reduce overall costs through requiring only a single line closure with its associated costs and revenue loss and would reduce the amount of disruption suffered by passengers.

Network Rail's initial study has concluded that:

- "The twin track extension is viable between Crediton and Newton St Cyres in its entirety with no restriction to lines speed, including a 70 mph turnout to the Exeter end of Newton St Cyres. A small line speed enhancement to 75 mph on this section would be possible, but would be at the limit of some geometry parameters. The initial design has double track extending a short way beyond Newton St Cyres station. A reduction of around 40 chains (805 metres) would move this crossover beyond the station and remove the need for a second platform. Further timetabling work will be needed to identify if this is feasible;
- Twin tracking and reconfiguring the Okehampton and Barnstaple lines as Up and Down lines to Coleford Junction is viable, with line speed increase on the Okehampton route to match that of the Barnstaple line (70 mph), subject to minor track works;
- Coleford Junction can be reinstated as a pair of high speed crossovers with no restriction to line speed, to continue either to Okehampton (40 mph) or Barnstaple (70 mph) on the respective single lines;
- Second platforms at Newton St Cyres and Yeoford are viable and options exist for their configuration to access Up and Down sides. Broader accessibility requirements have not been assessed at this stage."

As the business case develops, modelling, simulation and other operational study techniques could be used to test the optimal length of the dynamic loop to achieve the desired operational benefits. In general, the shorter a loop is, the less effective it is as a 'dynamic loop'. A decision, for example, to locate the new point work to the south of Yeoford station would potentially save the cost of reinstating a second platform at Yeoford and the associated accessibility requirements, but would effectively permanently reduce the length of the dynamic loop, as it is difficult to see how a case could be made for a second expensive intervention. Any such operational study/modelling/simulation would need to accommodate the operational characteristics of better-performing future trains as well as today's older trains in order to avoid locking further constraints into the route longer-term.

In contrast, a decision only to construct the Yeoford element of the loop initially and leave the Newton St Cyres extension until later to save initial cost would not result in a permanent loss of loop length, but would result in a loop around three miles shorter than it could be in the shorter term. It would need to be established whether that would meet the operational objectives, as it could still result in southbound trains having to await delayed northbound ones at Crediton station.

#### *4) Creating additional double track on the northern part of the route to allow trains to pass*

Simple network theory shows that on a single track line such as Exeter to Barnstaple where an end-to-end journey is close to or more than an hour, trains need to pass at the half-way point in order to operate an hourly service. For a half-hourly service, at least two additional passing places are needed at around one quarter and three quarters of the route length. It is assumed that the Newton St Cyres to Coleford Junction dynamic loop would provide the southernmost of those additional two passing places. That means that a further passing capability is needed on the northern half of the route, noting that the existing Eggesford passing place is around two miles further south than the half-way point. The fact that there are six regular station stops south of Eggesford, but only two to the north of it, means that the passing place currently at Eggesford should ideally be further north.

Given that improving operational performance is a scheme objective, at this stage it is noted that the very best outcome would be for there to be a single dynamic passing loop of substantial length on the northern part of the line too. That would allow trains to pass each other at line speed and would limit the impact of any delays imported onto the route from elsewhere on the network, as it would not be necessary for trains to stop in order to pass each other. It may also help in reducing journey times, as it would not be necessary for margins to be built into the timetable for the passing move. At this early stage, therefore, the vision includes a dynamic loop on the northern part of the line.

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As the business case develops, however, it is possible that constraints including funding and/or technical issues with the existing line may constrain that vision. In those circumstances, one or more shorter loops may prove to a viable alternative and are therefore not excluded at this stage as a possibility. Timetabling and operability studies/simulation could be used to help decision-making. Any such operational study/modelling/simulation would need to accommodate the operational characteristics of better-performing future trains as well as today's older trains in order to avoid locking further constraints into the route longer-term.

It should, however, be noted that a northern passing loop may prove more difficult to justify in value for money terms than a southern one between Newton St Cyres and Coleford, as no double track is already in place. The southern loop would involve new point work to create a loop out of the existing pair of single lines, with a southerly extension. In contrast a northern passing loop would require new double track where none currently exists.

Network Rail's options study includes an action to "identify constraints on the location of new loops between Coleford and Barnstaple". That is a good starting point, as it will help identify potential options for passing locations[s] for further development.

#### *5) Reinstating second platforms at stations on the new double track sections*

All stations on the Exeter to Barnstaple line had at least two platforms until British Rail singled the track and converted the section of route between Crediton and Yeoford/the former Coleford Junction to parallel single lines. Now, only Crediton and Eggesford have two platforms in operational use. Where double track is reinstated through a station, a second platform would need to be brought back into use<sup>161</sup>. The double tracking general principles set out above recommend avoiding double tracking at stations except where it is essential to achieve the scheme objectives.



At Yeoford the second platform already exists, as seen in the adjacent (photo: author). Subject to a satisfactory condition survey, the task would be to bring it up to good modern standards, including modern low energy lighting and shelter rather than building a new platform from scratch.

A key challenge is the high cost of installing a footbridge and lifts to enable the second platform to be accessed, as a set of steep steps to the road bridge would not meet current accessibility standards, which do not normally allow new station facilities to be constructed that are inaccessible to

disabled people and to others with mobility issues or with heavy luggage. Moreover, any such facilities would go against the general thrust of this modernisation scheme of making stations more usable/accessible to passengers.

Current access to the single platform at Yeoford is constrained and a fuller redesign of the station as part of reinstating the second platform would have the benefit of providing better overall accessibility/usability, in particular potentially allowing passenger access from the western side of the tracks across the former goods yard<sup>162</sup>, which is where the largest area of habitation in Yeoford is. A lower cost option, subject to design and feasibility, might be to keep the existing platform as it is and enable access to the reinstated platform across the former goods yard site.

It might be thought that a second platform at Yeoford would allow the station to be used again as the interchange point for passengers travelling between Northern Devon and Okehampton, potentially reducing journey times. However, this would require full accessibility between the platforms and would therefore involve materially greater cost than potentially simpler solutions. GWR's train planning work suggests that the opening of the new Okehampton Interchange station is likely to prevent new calls at Yeoford being introduced onto Okehampton train services, as they would reduce turn-round times and negatively impact on operational performance. Moreover, Crediton is a better place for interchange, as all trains stop and the station has facilities including a café for waiting passengers.

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<sup>161</sup> Penryn on the Falmouth line was made into a passing place with only one platform, but the track layout enabling that has its own operational and performance issues.

<sup>162</sup> The second platform was originally an island platform not accessible for passengers directly from the goods yard.

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#### 6) Modernising crossing control and signalling systems

Before British Rail's drastic rationalisation of the railway infrastructure on the route, signalling had been highly traditional, with multiple manual signal boxes controlling relatively short sections of line. Only Crediton signal box survived the rationalisation. A ground frame was installed to permit occasional use by engineers of the remaining sidings at Barnstaple. Local control of the passing place by train crew was installed at Eggesford.

This background means that the route has never had the route-wide electrical power cabling, associated troughing/support and electrical power feeds associated with more modern forms of colour light signalling and train detection systems. This means that converting the route to modern control and signalling entails large amounts of costly physical work. The additional double track and associated point work needed to upgrade to the route to allow additional trains to run, together with upgraded level crossing control systems<sup>163</sup> mean that the route's signalling/train control systems would need to be upgraded or replaced. Network Rail's study set out in section 3) above includes "Options for enhanced and efficient signalling of the line."

Resignalling schemes are typically planned many years in advance and it can be difficult for smaller schemes such as this one with signalling implications to find their way into the overall railway signalling work bank programme.

One way of achieving an order of magnitude idea of how big a scheme is in signalling/train control terms is to count the number of 'Signalling Equivalent Units' (SEU) involved. This approach was developed by Network Rail to assist its understanding of the relative scale of signalling schemes. Network Rail<sup>164</sup> explains that its development work "demonstrated that there was an approximately linear relationship between unit cost and the volume of signalling functionality that an interlocking was required to control ... it has been recognised by industry and UK's The Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) as being an appropriate method of calculation for business planning and sustainability modelling." Network Rail defines an SEU as: "each single trackside output function controlled by the interlocking. These are represented by the following signalling elements: every signal, every controlled point end, plungers, ground frames, signalling work associated with level crossings, and any other attributes that require a particular control function within the interlocking."

Network Rail has estimated that there is the overall capability in Britain to achieve around 1,800 SEU conventional, non-digital renewals per annum<sup>165</sup>. By way of background, Network Rail reports<sup>166</sup> that the large Bristol area resignalling scheme involved 703 SEUs. In comparison, the Exeter to Barnstaple scheme is very modest in scale. On the basis of the scope of works for the additional track and passing places set out in the sections above, together with control of Eggesford level crossings from both directions in lieu of the pull cord and platform cabinet, a simple count of the new controlled point ends needed suggests an overall count of new 20 SEUs<sup>167</sup>.

The removal of some existing point ends at places where they would no longer be needed such as at Crediton and the Eggesford level crossing control equipment would save ongoing maintenance and longer-term renewal costs. Replacement of the outdated signalling/control equipment used on the route would also reduce the risks arising from technical obsolescence and the costs associated with outdated equipment with few suppliers.

A key issue is how and when such an upgrade might be achieved. Unlike some more straightforward interventions such as resurfacing a car park, the market for signalling design and construction personnel is tight, as is the market for the supply of the necessary specialised equipment. They are all in short supply and, even if finance external to normal railway renewals/enhancement funding was found, there would be explicit

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<sup>163</sup> For example, replacing the driver/guard-operated level crossing at Eggesford. On the Northumberland Line for example, where road crossings have not been replaced by an overbridge such as at Newsham, level crossings are remotely-controlled, with CCTV or obstacle detection as safeguards.

<sup>164</sup> <https://www.networkrailconsulting.com/news-and-publications-2/news/introduction-to-signalling-equivalent-units/#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20SEU%3F,function%20controlled%20by%20the%20interlocking.>

<sup>165</sup> *Digital Railway Long-Term Deployment Plan Technical Report*, Network Rail, <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Digital-Railway-Long-Term-Deployment-Plan-Technical-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>

<sup>166</sup> [https://www.networkrailconsulting.com/our-capabilities/network-rail-projects/bristol-area-signalling-renewal-and-enhancement/#:~:text=Resignalling:,Overhead%20Line%20Equipment%20\(OLE\).](https://www.networkrailconsulting.com/our-capabilities/network-rail-projects/bristol-area-signalling-renewal-and-enhancement/#:~:text=Resignalling:,Overhead%20Line%20Equipment%20(OLE).)

<sup>167</sup> One point end at Newton St Cyres, four point ends at the reinstated Coleford Junction, four point ends for a pair of passing loops on the northern end of the line, one new signal for each point end and two level crossing control units to replace the Eggesford pull cord and platform control box.

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competition with other schemes on the national rail network for the necessary human resources and equipment.

As it appears unlikely that Network Rail would deprioritise schemes elsewhere in the country for the benefit of the Barnstaple scheme, one way forward might be to 'piggyback' on a wider resignalling scheme. That is the approach adopted for the Mid Cornwall Metro scheme, which has incorporated its signalling and control needs into the second phase of the Cornish resignalling scheme. However, the final phase of those works, which also included some improvements in Devon, finished in 2024.

Further discussion with Network Rail will be necessary to establish when Barnstaple line signalling works might be possible if subsumed into a wider project or whether another approach not involving piggybacking on a wider project might be possible. The very small scale of the signalling works needed based on the simple SEU count above suggests that one argument to Network Rail could be that the scheme is small enough not to affect the overall signalling resources picture materially, as it represents only 1.1% of the overall annual 1,800 SEU capability. Even if the SEU count in this section was materially wrong and needed to increase by for example 100%, that would not change this conclusion on scale.

The control of the public road level crossing and passing place at Eggesford is particularly important to the modernisation of the route, as the current hourly service would not be possible without it. Originally controlled by a signal box, the crossing is now controlled in the northbound direction by a trackside pullcord manually



operated by the driver through opening the driver's cab window after the train has stopped. The train then

proceeds across the crossing and stops at the station platform. In the southbound direction the crossing is controlled by the train guard at a platform-mounted control unit (photos: author). The technology is outdated, is subject to failure and adds time to journeys. Moreover, as currently configured, it depends on trains being used on the route which have an opening window for the driver at the right position. Some modern trains do not have this feature. Should GWR's plans for a new fleet of trains materialise, it is likely that significant alterations to the crossing control technology would be needed, even if no wider modernisations were to be undertaken.

#### *7) Using modern monitoring technology to improve the resilience of line infrastructure to severe weather events*

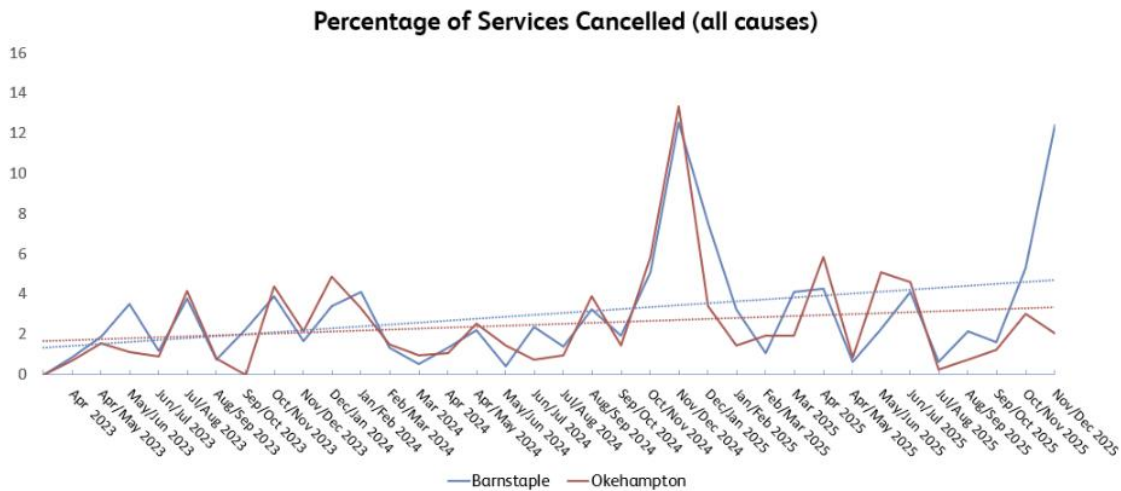
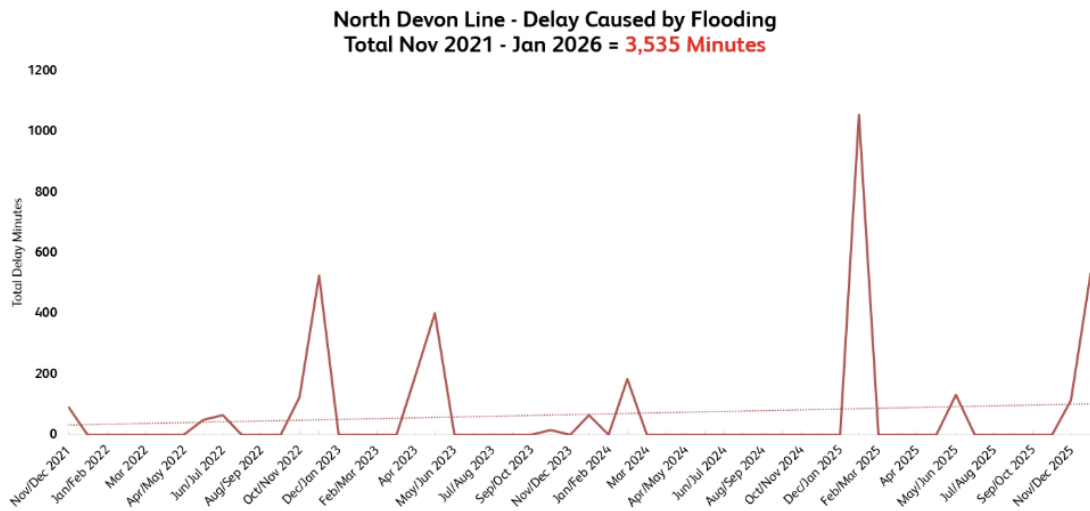
The reactive approach currently used by Network Rail to managing the risks from severe weather is no longer sufficient for a climate-vulnerable line with the substantial wider socio-economic importance explained elsewhere in this document. Network Rail's CP7 Weather Resilience & Climate Change Adaptation analysis<sup>168</sup> shows that wetter winters and higher peak flows are now probable annual events, not rare shocks. The proportion of flood-exposed railway could increase from 37% to 54% nationally by mid-century. The North Devon Line's proximity to multiple floodplains places it at disproportionately high risk. While ensuring that safety is fully maintained, a more active approach to management of the risks using modern technology could reduce the impact on train services of sudden closures. This approach is supported by the fact relayed by Network Rail that the structures on the route have so far in practice suffered little actual damage as a result of severe rain events.

The graphics on the following page (Network Rail) show how the Barnstaple route has suffered increasing numbers of both delay minutes and train cancellations as a result of flood-related incidents. The figures do not reflect the long closure between the end of January and the late February 2026:

<sup>168</sup> <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/CP7-WRCCA-Plans-combined-summary-of-all-regions-April-2024.pdf>

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While most focus in this document is on line closures, there are also impacts from waterlogging and other issues associated with excess water that cannot be accommodated by legacy drainage systems. In particular, there are potentially significant risks to the shorter journey time ambition from temporary speed restrictions resulting from ‘wet spots’ and other impairments to the track caused by poor drainage of excess water.

Ultimately, a goal of eliminating closures through re-engineering of relevant structures could be set. However, it may be best not to attempt to make this the immediate goal, with the wider modernisation measures set out in this document elsewhere prioritised instead. The key issue is that strengthening civil engineering structures to withstand the full rigours imposed on them by increasingly extreme weather events counts as ‘enhancement’ funding under the Network Rail Control Period funding formulae. On that basis, such strengthening would compete for capital funds both with other weather-related enhancement needs elsewhere in the South West and the rest of the country, in particular in places where actual damage to structures happens on a regular basis, and also with other elements of the route modernisation scheme covered in this document. A further issue is that, at this stage, the information needed to identify all the interventions required to provide a full re-engineering solution is not available.

In Peninsula Transport’s *Strategic Implementation Plan*<sup>169</sup> “We will enhance the resilience of the transport network” is one of five ‘Vision Goals’. Several resilience schemes are identified as early priorities, with completion of resilience works on the coastal railway between Dawlish and Teignmouth as the key Tier One priority for rail. Improved frequency and journey time reductions for the Barnstaple to Exeter line are also identified as a Tier One priority. The same prioritisation is applied in the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport*

<sup>169</sup> 28 May 2025: <https://www.peninsulatransport.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Peninsula-Transport-Strategic-Implementation-Plan-55307-Pr8.pdf>

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*Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>170</sup>. As this business case develops, the arguments in favour of a more permanent solution through re-engineering of structures should be further reviewed and refined with a view to that becoming a longer-term ambition.

In the shorter term, other investments to modernise the line should be accompanied by using modern technology to improve the resilience of the line infrastructure to severe weather events. This would combine ensuring continued full safety of operation with reducing full route closures or other disruptions to the minimum necessary. It would also increase understanding of the issues faced by the structures on the route and help develop a longer-term intervention plan.

An opportunity is presented by the fact that Network Rail is already combining AI-powered scour monitoring and the use of digital twins<sup>171</sup> on one of the bridges on the Barnstaple line. The trial involves:

- An AI system using cameras to detect sediment movement and debris in real time;
- Flow-velocity sensors profiling turbulence and scour-driving hydrodynamics;
- Geophysical/sonar techniques mapping voids and foundation depth; and
- Digital twins providing predictive modelling and evidence for operational decisions about whether to impose temporary speed restrictions (TSR) or require a full route closure.

If this trial is successful, it could provide the basis for a double-pronged approach tackling the severe weather problem in both the shorter and longer terms:

- a) In the shorter-term, digital monitoring deployment to improve operational decisions in the event of severe weather and to help provide more information to build a case for longer-term investment in improved resilience:
  - Extending the CGI/NR AI-scour system across all high-risk bridges;
  - Standardising digital twins into Exeter Control workflows; and
  - Introducing predictive alerts to minimise full closures and speed up reopening.
- b) Beyond the shorter-term, building a business case for a programme of structural, river engineering works, drainage, and track formation improvements to address all wider severe weather-related risks:
  - Prioritising the significant high-risk structures for enhanced scour assessment, modelling and mitigation;
  - Targeting the River Taw and River Yeo crossings, particularly those in Flood Zone 3;
  - Introducing pier protection, bed armouring, training walls or channel re-profiling where needed; and
  - Improving culverts, lineside drainage and low-lying formation to reduce persistent waterlogging.

#### 7) Changing station request stop status

As explained in the Strategic Case, Network Rail's *Timetable Planning Rules* covering the Western & Wales Route<sup>172</sup> allow a shorter than normal station dwell time of 30 seconds to be put into the working timetable. However, when most or all trains do in fact stop at request stop stations, the sub-standard dwell time assumption translates into delay, in particular where there are numerous request stops. Equally, where no passenger actually wants to alight or board, the need to slow on approach to a request stop station wastes time and increases fuel consumption and hence journey time and operating costs. These factors become significant when there are numerous request stops and where the turn-round time at the end of the line is as tight as it often is on the Exeter to Barnstaple line (as little as three or four minutes: see table in the Strategic Case).

Newton St Cyres, Yeoford, Lapford, Kings Nympton, Portsmouth Arms, Umberleigh and Chapelton are all request stops. Of the intermediate stations, only Crediton, Coplestone and Eggesford are not request stops.

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<sup>170</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>171</sup> Defined by the Department for Business & Trade as: "A digital twin is a virtual model of an object, a system, or a process. It is connected to its real-world counterpart by a 2-way flow of right-time data, meaning it mimics it in all aspects. This helps us test decisions before we make them and understand how different actions might affect the real world. However, it is essential that at all times, the real-world counterpart is able to continue to operate safely and securely without its digital twin.": <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-a-digital-twin-is-and-how-you-can-contribute/what-a-digital-twin-is-and-how-you-can-contribute>

<sup>172</sup> <https://sacuksprodnrndigital0001.blob.core.windows.net/operational-rules/Operational%20Rules/TPR/TPR%202024/V4/TPR%202024%20V4%20WW.pdf>

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As the Strategic Case shows, Umberleigh, Eggesford, Coppleshill, Yeoford and Morchard Road both have the highest level of usage among these stations and the highest level of growth in usage. Lapford, Kings Nympton and Newton St Cyres have lower usage but are growing in usage. Chapelton and Portsmouth Arms have both very low usage and little perceptible growth.



A possible solution would be to combine removing request stop status from some or all of the most frequently used request stop stations with installing request stop kiosks at lesser used stations where not all trains stop. These (photo: Network Rail) have already been installed on the Far North Line in Scotland. They enable a passenger on the platform to make a request stop request which is communicated to the train driver through Network Rail's railway radio network. Network Rail says about the kiosks<sup>173</sup>: "By enabling the driver to be alerted in advance of the need to stop in the station, rather than being reliant on hand-signalling, it delivers a safer and more reliable system, and means that trains don't need to slow down at stations where there are no passengers waiting."

The time savings gained from the kiosks at the smaller stations could be used to offset conversion of the higher usage stations to non-request stop status. Overall, the effect would be to stabilise a likely worsening of performance arising from request stops on tight turn-rounds at Barnstaple and crossing moves in the Exeter direction. An operational study would be necessary to establish the best balance of conversion of stations to non-request status and installation of kiosks.

This approach would be particularly relevant in the event that further redoubling of the route and the introduction of a two trains per hour service proved not to be fundable or was only fundable at a later stage. It would still be relevant to the two trains per hour service, however, as it could enable an increase in the number of trains stopping at the smaller stations where most trains are currently not timetabled to stop, in particular the group of smaller stations with growing usage: Lapford, Kings Nympton and Newton St Cyres. It seems likely that the low level of usage and limited catchment areas mean that Chapelton and Portsmouth Arms stations would remain request stops even under this scenario.

*8) Replacing the old diesel trains with modern trains offering shorter journey times through much higher acceleration, improved operational performance, selective door opening to achieve greater capacity without costly platform lengthening, more comfort for passengers, ideally level boarding for improved accessibility and greater environmental friendliness, including lower noise levels*

*Replacement of the older diesel trains currently used on the route*

The trains currently normally used on the Exeter to Barnstaple route are diesel multiple units of Classes 150, 158 and 16X. The first two were built in the early and late 1980s, the third in the early 1990s. The Exeter to Okehampton service is operated by Class 150 DMUs. All are therefore over 30 years old, with some 40 years old. All these trains have been refurbished and upgraded by GWR to good standards, but there is a real question about how much longer they can continue to operate.

The 26 Class 175 DMUs which GWR has acquired to help increase capacity on South West of England routes such as Barnstaple were built in 2000. They are therefore newer than the trains currently used, but remain pure diesel trains. They will represent an important move forward for the route in the shorter term, but are essentially an interim solution and therefore do not count for the purposes of this scheme.

The wider picture is a government target set in 2018 of phasing out all diesel-only trains by 2040 as part of a wider drive towards decarbonisation. The current trains' older diesel engines perform less well in environmental terms and operational performance than more modern diesel ones and much less well than alternative power source or electric trains. They do not possess a flexible system of selective door opening, which limits options for increasing train lengths and thereby capacity without costly platform extensions. New trains with a fully specified selective door opening system would therefore also be an important part of achieving the increased capacity needed on the route to tackle high levels of existing and anticipated future growth. The older diesel engines and hydraulic drive trains result in high levels of noise, both inside the trains

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<sup>173</sup> <https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/further-request-stop-kiosks-added-on-far-north-line#:~:text=Request%2Dstop%20kiosks%20consist%20of,of%20drivers%20approaching%20the%20stations.>

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for passengers and train crew and externally. With their underfloor-mounted engines, drive trains and other equipment, the diesel trains have higher floors, resulting in large stepping distances which can only be overcome for passengers in wheelchairs by the use of mobile ramps, but which are also difficult for passengers with limited mobility or with baby buggies and heavy luggage. The role of rolling stock in facilitating better accessibility is discussed in more detail in the stations section below.

Rapid developments are being made in rail traction. At the date this document was being drafted, battery trains operating a short distance beyond the core third rail electric network had already started operation on the Merseyrail network and GWR had brought into service a battery train using a specially developed flash charging system on the Greenford branch in London following a trial period. Porterbrook had the HydroFLEX hydrogen train on trial. Both battery-electric and hydrogen-powered trains are in operational use in mainland Europe. Electric, hydrogen and diesel hybrid power trains have been in use in the bus sector for a number of years. It is noted that 'green hydrogen' has been identified as a potential economic growth sector for Torridge.

As part of a separate, complementary scheme, GWR is reviewing options for replacing the older diesel multiple unit trains of three classes that currently operate secondary and branch line services in the South West as well as those operating in the Bristol and Thames Valley areas ('Green Railway for Growth' – previously called 'Project Churchward': also see the Management Case). GWR Managing Director Mark Hopwood and Engineering Director Dr Simon Green have said<sup>174</sup> that GWR is looking at new battery-electric trains for this fleet renewal.

However, the interviews also acknowledge that no decisions are imminent. It is therefore not the intention to debate exactly what type or class of train might in practice be used for a modernised Exeter to Barnstaple rail route. An exception is made to this principle below in order to discuss the potential use of tram-trains as part of a different approach to a signalling upgrade. The wider direction of rolling stock development means a modern, alternative powered train could in the future be used on the Exeter to Barnstaple route.

The trains normally used on the Barnstaple route currently all have a maximum speed of 90 mph (Class 158/165) or 75 mph (Class 150) and those used on the Okehampton route have a maximum speed of 75 mph. All modern equivalent trains have a maximum speed of at least 100 mph and better acceleration. The much higher acceleration of modern electrically-powered or alternative fuel trains could be an important factor in reducing journey times<sup>175</sup> and/or allowing some 'buffer' in route timings to help address operational performance issues. It would also limit the impact on journey times in the two trains per hour option of a larger number of non-request stops. Electrically-powered trains typically have better operational performance than diesel trains. They are mechanically much simpler than a diesel train, which has many more moving parts to go wrong.

#### *Tram-trains*

Some voices in the industry and government have argued that tram-trains could reduce the costs of modernising or reopening regional speed railways. A key argument is that this type of train could enable simplified, cheaper signalling solutions to be used. That approach is not favoured at this stage. In summary, key arguments against basing a modernisation scheme on the use of tram-trains and tramway-style signalling on the Exeter – Barnstaple line are (set out more fully below):

- Tram-trains operate both on national 'heavy rail' infrastructure and street-running tramways/light rail, but there are no plans for trams or light rail in Exeter or Barnstaple and, unlike many places with tram-trains which have no city centre heavy rail station, there are several stations conveniently located in Exeter city centre;
- As a compromise between the characteristics of trams and trains, tram-trains are poorly suited to a rural regional route as long as the Exeter-Barnstaple line where higher speed and comfort than typical for tram-trains is needed to address the key problem of long journey times and provide attractive journeys competing with cars;
- For modernised or new regional rail routes with no street-running, a form of heavy rail vehicle with braking and other adaptations to allow tramway-style line-of-sight operation seems to be implied rather than a traditional tram-train, but no such vehicle appears to be currently available or under design;

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<sup>174</sup> In interviews published in *Modern Railways* magazine, September 2025.

<sup>175</sup> For example, the material journey time reductions achieved through the electrification of the Great Western Main were the result of the much higher acceleration rates of the Class 800/802 Intercity Express trains that replaced the old diesel High Speed Trains. The Class 800/802 have the same top speed in every day usage as the HSTs they replaced.

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- Tramway-style operation of the Exeter-Barnstaple route could permanently lock in features that currently contribute to the slow overall journey times, impairing a key objective of the modernisation scheme;
- There is no publicly-available information demonstrating that tramway-style signalling would be materially cheaper on an equivalent basis to heavy rail signalling and crossing control systems;
- The lack of precedent for tramway-style signalling and operation on a national rail route in Britain would present material technical, operational, commercial and financial risks for the sponsor of the modernisation scheme, in particular if that was a local authority;
- Once converted to tramway-style signalling, other types of train would not be able to use the route, meaning that other trains such as freight trains to/from Meldon Quarry, occasional charter trains or through trains to/from London Waterloo could not operate: with freight trains for Meldon Quarry already planned, tram-style signalling and operation would be limited to the section of line north of the former Coleford Junction; and
- Using a special class of train solely on the Barnstaple route would cut across the material economies of scale GWR and performance benefits sought by GWR in its forthcoming procurement of trains to replace the old DMUs used across its network.

As seen in the earlier sections on infrastructure enhancement, a key issue on the Exeter to Barnstaple route is the high cost of upgrading the signalling/train control systems to enable additional passing capability to be created and enabling higher speeds across some road level crossings. One challenge which some parts of the industry and government have made is whether the use of tram-trains could result in materially lower signalling and train control costs on upgraded or reopened rail routes. Given that background and the potential for this challenge to arise at an early stage, consideration is given here to whether tram-trains and associated tramway-style signalling might be a suitable approach for the Exeter to Barnstaple line.

Tram-trains are capable of operating both on traditional street-running tram track with its different rail profile/very tight curves<sup>176</sup> and on national rail tracks alongside traditional heavy rail passenger and freight trains. Tram-trains share the ability of trams to be driven 'line of sight' with simplified signalling tramway-style signalling on the tramway parts of the routes in which they operate on the basis that unlike a normal train they can stop as quickly as a road vehicle. They are also able to inter-operate with traditional heavy rail vehicles on the traditional rail network under the control of normal heavy rail signalling systems. That means that the vehicles also need to be equipped with the necessary antennae and other equipment to detect and react to signals from track-mounted AWS and TPWS systems<sup>177</sup> on heavy rail routes.

Tram-trains currently operate on the Sheffield tramway system, extending around 5 miles beyond the city tramway to Rotherham over Network Rail infrastructure on an otherwise freight-only route. Tram-trains are also integral to the Cardiff Valleys network upgrade currently being implemented by Transport for Wales. Three routes Cardiff Valleys rail routes are involved: Treherbert, Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil. Street-running tramway operation in Cardiff Bay is an integral part of this plan. A substantial extension of street running in Cardiff over and above the initial street running to Cardiff Bay is also planned under the Cardiff Crossrail scheme. For the Cardiff area routes not connected to the planned street-running tramway in Cardiff (Rhymney, Coryton, Ebbw Vale, Maesteg, Barry and Vale of Glamorgan), Transport for Wales will continue to use heavy rail vehicles, not tram-trains. Tram-trains also operate on numerous routes in several countries in mainland Europe and in several other parts of the world.

In all these cases, tram-trains operate over both a traditional street-running tramway or light rail system and a part of the heavy rail network. In all cases tram-trains have been introduced in order to allow city centre tramway on-street operation to be combined with operation beyond the city area on existing heavy rail routes with the tram-trains operating alongside normal heavy rail trains under normal heavy rail signal control. In contrast, there are no plans to introduce street running trams or light rail to any of the areas served by the Exeter to Barnstaple line. Unlike many of the places which have introduced tram-trains, where the main line stations are often at a considerable distance from the city centre or where newly developing parts of the city

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<sup>176</sup> Although most modern tramways are constructed to the same nominal track gauge as heavy railways, trams have wheels with narrower treads/different tread profile and smaller flanges and cannot normally operate on heavy rail track. Conversely, normal heavy rail vehicles cannot use special tramway track.

<sup>177</sup> Systems with beacons mounted between the rails which (to explain very simplistically) send signals to the train warning the driver about restrictive signal aspects and speed limits. Where the driver does not react appropriately to the in-cab warnings, the systems automatically apply the train's brakes.

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centre such as in Cardiff benefit from connection to the rail network, Exeter city centre is well served by railway stations. Barnstaple station is not in the town centre, but it is hard to see how a tramway could rectify that situation resulting from the closure of the dedicated rail bridge over the river Taw to the old Barnstaple Town station.

Tram-trains are a compromise between the technical and other characteristics needed for on-street tramway operation and for operation on the National Rail network. Nothing on the market or in current operation elsewhere in Europe has the comfort, including toilets, and speeds compatible with the 40 mile route from Exeter to Barnstaple and potentially an additional 9¼ miles to/from Bideford if that separate scheme was implemented.

The Cardiff Valleys tram-train routes (Treherbert, Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil) are significantly shorter than Barnstaple to Exeter, being respectively 23/22/24 miles long. Unlike the long rural regional route between Barnstaple and Exeter with its hourly or half-hourly service should modernisation take place, they operate in a semi-urban environment with many closely-spaced stations, where a high proportion of passengers undertake shorter journeys rather than most originating at the terminus as is the case with the Barnstaple service. Once the Cardiff Valleys scheme is fully implemented, each of the three routes will have a four trains per hour service, with a much higher metro-style frequency where all three routes combine south of Pontypridd.

Sections of the Exeter to Barnstaple line already have permitted maximum speeds of between 55 mph and 70 mph. The Strategic Case argues that shorter journey times are a critical improvement needed to address the key problem of geographical peripherality resulting from the long overall journey times, which is one of the route's primary weaknesses. This speaks in favour of a type of train combining high acceleration (which tram-trains do have) with the ability to operate for long periods comfortably at higher speeds. Tram-trains as a compromise between the needs of city-centre operation and heavy rail are not likely to address those needs optimally.

The following table (author) compares and contrasts the typical characteristics of tram-trains and heavy rail

Comparison of vehicle types as currently operated and deployed			
Characteristic	Non-high speed heavy rail	Tram-train	Tram
Maximum speed	90 mph – 125 mph (modern DMU/bimode/electric)	40 mph – 50 mph in tramway mode / TfW Class 398 for Cardiff Valleys 62 mph off-tramway	40 mph – 50 mph
Signalling	Absolute block / overlap / driver reminder / overspeed protection / phased roll-out of transmission-based signalling (ETCS)	Heavy rail signalling on national rail system / tramway signalling on tram system	Line of sight / simplified tramway signalling / interface with road signals on-street
Network characteristics	Easy curvature and gradients with higher speeds on running lines / level crossings with various safety systems gradually being replaced by bridges or abolished / passenger trains share network with freight trains	Vehicles run on both a specific tramway and a specific authorised section of the national network	Tramway track, very tight curvature and gradients to fit street environment – in some cases off-street adapted former heavy rail lines / interactions with road traffic by line of sight control and tramway signalling interfacing with road signals on-street / no network access for non-tramway vehicles
Fleet deployment	National / regional / local: entire national network subject to gauging approval	Urban / peri-urban: discrete networks and specific permitted national network extensions	Urban / peri-urban: discrete networks
Service characteristics	Less frequent train service and more widely spaced station stops: fully timetabled operation	Frequent, closely-spaced station/tramway stops: timetabled on heavy rail routes, often combining with other tram routes in city centre to create 'turn-up-and-go' frequency	Frequent, closely-spaced tramway stops: 'turn-up-and-go' frequency with service typically following a 'headway' principle rather than a timetable
Driving knowledge characteristics	General driving skills training supplemented by 'signing' relevant routes and train classes, allowing wide deployment	Driving skills training requirements cover the specific parts of both classes of network the tram-trains operate on	Driving skills training requirements limited to the specific tramway in question

trains, the services they operate and other typical features of each type of operation. This table and the earlier analyses emphasise strong differences, which begs the question of what those who argue in favour of tram-trains for modernised or reopened regional routes with no tramway-style operation have in mind:

It may be that 'tram-train' in the normal sense is a misnomer for these cases, as the special compromise wheel and flange profiles and bogie yaw characteristics designed to allow operation on both types of network would not be necessary for a pure heavy rail network with normal rails and easy curvature. Nor would the body shell adaptations to improve pedestrian safety while operating on-street be necessary. Instead, a form of heavy rail vehicle with braking and other adaptations capable of line of sight operation appears to be implied. However, no vehicles of that sort appear to have been designed or tested in operation.

The visibility of the road from the railway line and vice versa at the level crossings such as those at Salmon Pool and Eggesford and at other crossings on the Barnstaple line is so limited without

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fundamental reconstruction that there must be a question about whether tram-trains would make any material difference to permitted speeds. The operational procedures for line-of-sight operation could look very similar to the slow approach and full stop necessary now. Even if use of tram-trains could in principle reduce signalling costs, it could impair achievement of the core scheme objective of addressing peripherality by reducing journey times.

Moreover, modern tramway systems do not operate without signalling, in particular where there are sections of single track<sup>178</sup> where the risk of head-on collision needs to be managed. Most of the Barnstaple route is and will remain single track, even if passing loops are expanded. Furthermore, following the fatal derailment of a speeding TfL Croydon Tramlink tram at Sandilands on a tight curve with limited visibility, there is a countervailing trend for more heavy rail-like train control features such as overspeed detection to be added to tramway signalling systems. That means that signalling costs would not be avoided, but would be different to heavy rail signalling solutions. No information has been found in the public domain at this stage comparing tramway and heavy rail signalling costs on an equivalent basis, let alone anything which gives confidence that material cost reduction would definitely result.

Because of this, it would also be important for a local authority sponsoring the route upgrade to understand the nature and extent of risk involved. There are technical, operational, commercial and financial risks. The former arise from using the line as a test bed for a previously untested use of tramway-style signalling equipment, vehicles and operational standards on a heavy rail line. This raises issues about how that equipment and those new standards would be approved, tested and brought into service. The commercial issues arise from the fact that a scheme like this is most likely to be sponsored by a local authority, with that local authority sponsor required to cover cost overruns. The sponsor of this scheme should ask itself why it would be appropriate to expose itself to such material financial risks by opting for an approach without clear precedent at this stage.

Once converted to tramway signalling and operational standards, it appears likely that the Barnstaple route could not host types of trains other than the specialised trains procured specially for it. That would rule out longer-distance services, occasional charter and other special passenger trains and freight trains from using the route. That would be problematic for the Okehampton line, where freight trains could operate if Meldon Quarry reopens. Media reports at the date of the latest version of this document not separately verified by this author suggest that the owners of Meldon Quarry were planning to reopen the quarry and to serve it with freight trains during 2026.

Because of this it is likely that tram-train tram-style signalling operation would have to be limited to the section north of the former Coleford Junction, with any route upgrade south of there undertaken with traditional heavy rail signalling. If there were savings to be made from not using heavy rail-style signalling, that would limit those savings. It would also mean that the ambition included in the latest Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan from 2025 for longer-distance trains to/from London Waterloo could not be realised. Moreover, it would also prevent the operator from using other types of train from its fleet to address shorter-term wider fleet issues or problems with the tram-trains.

As part of a separate, complementary scheme, GWR is reviewing options for replacing the older diesel multiple unit trains currently operating in the South West ('Green Railway for Growth' – previously called 'Project Churchward'). There are potentially material economies of scale for GWR in reducing the numbers of types of trains in currently in use<sup>179</sup>. There are also benefits for the Barnstaple route from being operated by a fleet of trains also used more widely across the network rather than a special fleet of trains dedicated to that route such as tram-trains or similar. In particular, a dedicated fleet for the Barnstaple route alone would need to be larger and therefore more expensive than the route allocation from the wider fleet to allow for non-availability due to maintenance, failures and accidents. Sharing trains with the wider fleet would also reduce the high costs and performance risks associated with the need to hold separate engineering spares, and to manage separate maintenance and safety regimes and staff training. It should be noted that the Cardiff Valleys tram-train scheme is a large and complex operation over several lines with high frequency of services, where the tram-

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<sup>178</sup> A good example is the Croydon tram system, which uses large sections of single track former heavy railway.

<sup>179</sup> Three different classes of train operate the Exeter to Barnstaple and Okehampton services alone (Classes 150/158/16X), including sub-classes. HSTs and Class 800/802 IETs also operate regional services in the South West, together with locomotive-hauled sleeper trains. The Class 175 DMU was added to the mix in December 2025, with the rest of the fleet to follow in 2026.

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trains are a material part of the overall fleet, not a small sub-type as would be the case if they only operated on the Exeter to Barnstaple line.

Staff training is particularly important. As well as general understanding of the driver role, train drivers need to learn in detail the characteristics of both the routes they drive on and the different classes of train that they need to drive, referred to as 'signing' for routes and classes of train. Moreover, that learning is a not one-off and needs to be refreshed. The combination of the need for drivers to sign a wide range of permutations of routes/train types and to refresh that knowledge means that keeping a sufficiently trained pool of drivers is challenging. Sufficient drivers may be available at a depot, but if they do not sign both the right routes and the right classes of train, cancellations will ensue. There are therefore potentially substantial performance benefits to reducing the numbers of types of train in use, consistent with a key scheme objective to improve operational performance on the route.

Drawing these strands together, it appears that the best approach for the Exeter to Barnstaple modernisation scheme would be not to reject the possibility of a tram-train/tramway signalling solution, but equally not to put all the eggs in that particular basket at this early stage of scheme development. It would be commercially very risky for a local authority scheme sponsor to stand financially behind complex technical and operational innovation that could end up running contrary to the full achievement of core scheme objectives, potentially locking in lower speeds/longer journey times when a key objective is to reduce journey times. Much higher costs and longer implementation times than initially expected could result from technical, standards and operational problems.

Instead, it would be better on a balance of risk to accept that an orthodox signalling solution might appear to have a higher initial cost, but that a higher but more predictable cost would be better than early commitment to a possibly cheaper solution where problems and unexpected risks emerging could end up costing dearly and could compromise achievement of key scheme objectives.

As the scheme business case development progresses, if a tram-train style vehicle and train control solution matured and proved itself elsewhere, including demonstrating that predictable lower cost is realistically achievable and that it is compatible with the higher running speeds necessary to achieve the desired journey time reductions, a view could be taken at that point to migrate the project to that technology, assuming of course that that was still economically viable at that stage of scheme development. A view would also need to be taken on whether it was acceptable to bar other types of train from the route if that was the implication of accepting a tram-style solution.

#### *9)/10) Improving and enlarging selected station car parks*

Little has been done to modernise most of the intermediate stations beyond improving the platform lighting and installing more modern waiting shelters and information points. British Rail sold large parts of the stations, in particular station buildings and former goods yards, to private owners. That resulted in the stations being awkwardly structured around private facilities not in railway use. At some stations there is little or no formal car parking, while at others small numbers of bays have been painted onto adjacent surfaces. In spite of that, cars are still parked on informal pieces of land and often in awkward ways, showing that there is demand to access the railway by car. In some cases, parts of the whole of the former station goods yards appear to be little used or even unused even though in private ownership.

Some stations such as Copplestone have seen new housing constructed in close vicinity. Others such as Eggesford and Umberleigh have little development in the immediate area, but serve a wider hinterland, as far as South Molton and Great Torrington in the latter case.



The adjacent photo (author) shows by way of example the entrance to Eggesford station.

The narrow pedestrian entrance is to the bottom right and a number of cars, one impinging on the public highway, can be seen parked in front of the now privately-owned former station house on a small, unlit, poorly marked car park.

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Another example is Umberleigh (photos: author), where the parking alongside the short access road to the station is normally fully occupied. Given that there are relatively few houses in the immediate vicinity of the station, 'kiss & ride' is important at this station, but the use of the access road for car parking and the large numbers of cars meeting some trains make for difficult scenes, with cars having difficulty in passing each other.



There is local concern that the village hall car parking area is used for rail purposes to the detriment of users of the hall.

The *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-*

*2040*<sup>180</sup> mentions Umberleigh specifically: "We will also improve facilities at key stations to provide public transport interchange hubs for accessing the rail network. The priority will be those stations where trains cross (making it easier to coordinate buses with train times in both directions) or where a car park can be provided to enable people travelling from a wider rural catchment to link with rail services, e.g. at Okehampton and Umberleigh."



At Umberleigh there is a substantial plot of concrete-surfaced land immediately adjacent to the platform not in active use other than for occasional Network Rail materials transfer that could if the owner agreed potentially provide a better location for car parking and allowing improved access for 'kiss and ride' on the existing access road (adjacent photo author).

Both Barnstaple and Crediton stations have car parks to good modern standards, but the continuing steep growth in passenger numbers mean that both are often close to capacity. Given its importance as a traffic source, Barnstaple needs particular attention. Unlike some other stations on the route, it is in a closely developed urban environment. In these circumstances, adding one or more 'decks' to provide a multi-storey car parking facility has been a frequently used option elsewhere. However, the footprint of the current car park is relatively small and may be too small to accommodate the spiral access ramp needed for a multi-storey solution. Moreover, it is constrained by the station buildings, the bus access road and the desirability of not blocking the potential reinstatement of train services to Bideford by building over the former track bed.

A full audit of each of the stations' car parking facilities and the willingness of private owners of sites to make them available would be necessary. A view would need to be taken on which stations should be prioritised for car park improvements and potential enlargement. That would need to include an assessment of accessibility from adjacent public roads and the impact on local traffic conditions. Where parts of former goods yards or other adjacent land might be needed for such improvements, an alternative to costly and time-consuming purchase could be for the train operator to enter into a medium/longer-term leases with the private land owner. This technique has been used elsewhere on GWR's station portfolio for the purposes of creating additional car parking spaces. GWR has a lot of experience of expanding car parks and improving smaller stations.

One point which will need to be given careful consideration is whether car park charging should be introduced where station car parks are materially upgraded. This could help finance increased costs, but equally could deter some potential users and could cause disputes with neighbours if railway users started parking on public roads or outside houses instead. A balance would need to be struck and fuller consideration should be given to where that balance lies as the business case develops.

Some might argue that priority should be given to active travel and that improvements for car users should not feature, pointing to the fact that the Devon County Council-sponsored new stations at Newcourt and Marsh

<sup>180</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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Barton both feature little car parking other than a small number of spaces for disabled users and a small area for 'kiss & ride', instead focusing on more sustainable active travel options. However, these stations were built to serve immediately adjacent new housing and existing industrial estates. That means that car parking is less relevant, as the stations are easy for many users to reach on foot or by cycle. In contrast, many of the intermediate stations on the Exeter to Barnstaple line are isolated from many actual and potential users at distances and over steep roads that are unlikely to attract much active travel. It would be better for these car users to use their cars for shorter journeys to the local station rather than driving longer distances or accessing the rail network at Tiverton Parkway<sup>181</sup>.

#### 11) Installing electric vehicle chargers at all stations with formal car parks

EV charging is a significant theme throughout the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>182</sup> (LTP). The LTP specifically highlights the proposed 'Hub & Ride' railway stations as locations suitable for EV charger installation: "We will develop 'Hub and Ride' facilities where several modes of transport come together, such as a railway station with bus connections, cycle options and EV charging." Other statements in the LTP show support for wider EV charging implementation without specifying railway stations specifically: "We will deliver Electric Vehicle (EV) charge points in settlements across Devon."

For many passengers accessing a station by car, the station car park would be a very convenient place to recharge an electric vehicle. That is likely to continue to be true, even as more homes acquire EV chargers and more EV chargers become available for those parking on-street. EV charging will become ever more important as part of the wider move to decarbonise society, even with improved vehicle battery life.

This item is separate from the section on improving station car parks, as it applies as much to stations such as Barnstaple and Crediton which already have good quality car parking as to the smaller intermediate stations with little formal parking provision. It also an element of scope which might be susceptible to quite different forms of funding, including potentially from the external private sector, compared to traditional rail schemes, as the vast majority of EV charging is not on the railway estate.



At the date of this document, GWR had already introduced EV charging at a small number of its over 200 stations<sup>183</sup>, working with ChargePoint Genie, a mobile app-based provider. Network Rail has announced that EV charging points will be installed across 10% of car parking spaces at its major stations by 2024<sup>184</sup>. The adjacent photo (Network Rail) shows EV charging points installed by Network Rail at its multi-storey car park at Reading station used by GWR train services.

Before deciding on which stations to prioritise for installation of EV chargers, it would be necessary to carry out an audit of electrical power supply to ensure that the available power is sufficient for EV charging and that it could be made available in the right location for EV charging use without excessive cost being incurred.

#### 12) Installing ticket machines at larger, higher use stations, and pay-as-you-go

None of the intermediate stations have ticket machines. While many passengers now use mobile phone-based ticketing, by no means all do and there is often poor mobile reception in rural Devon. With the numbers of ticket machines being reduced at some of the larger stations, there is a low cost opportunity to address ticketless travel and increase fare income (including among those who wish to pay) at larger stations such as Crediton (and possibly one or two others). On the busiest trains, the guard is already occupied with operational tasks such as controlling the doors and checking tickets. The challenge will only increase if trains are lengthened to address crowding.

A more modern form of ticketing is pay-as-you-go, which allows passengers to pay simply by tapping in and out of stations with a smart card, debit card or other contactless payment mode on a special reader (following photo by author at St Erth station in Cornwall) or on a ticket gate reader at stations equipped with ticket gates

<sup>181</sup> Where parking continues to be under pressure in spite of expansion in recent years.

<sup>182</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.gwr.com/stations-and-destinations/stations/car-parking/electric-car-charging>

<sup>184</sup> <https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/charge-while-you-travel-with-new-electric-vehicle-charging-points-at-network-rail-stations>

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such as Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central. The best fare is guaranteed to be offered and discounts such as railcards can also be accommodated. The Mid Cornwall Metro scope of works also includes the installation of pay-as-you-go readers at the stations on the route and extended to Plymouth and the Gunnislake branch, a GWR-run pay-as-you-go scheme already being in place in the western part of Cornwall.

Pay-as-you-go is becoming more popular across the country. It is particularly suited to regular travellers but less than daily travellers for whom traditional season tickets are not flexible enough and daily tickets more expensive and requiring more purchase transactions, as once initial registration is complete, no separate purchase transaction is necessary for each journey. The original Oyster scheme in London has expanded far

beyond the city area in a number of steps. The latest addition of 47 stations in the South East area from September 2024 was announced by the Rail Delivery Group on 27 August 2024<sup>185</sup>.

The English devolution White Paper<sup>186</sup> puts some emphasis on how devolution could drive new approaches to ticketing (by implication digital): “London shows how fully integrated, multi-modal ticketing helps to get people onto public transport. To expand these types of system across the country, Great British Railways will reform the rail ticketing system to make it simpler for passengers and drive innovation. This is particularly crucial where bus franchising is coming or is in place, and rail is often the missing piece.”

The Peninsula Transport Peninsula *Rail Strategy*<sup>187</sup> identifies multi-modal ticketing as part of its ‘Joined-Up Mobility’ initiative“.

Pay-as-you-go is therefore also recommended for the Exeter to Barnstaple route. However, it is only likely to achieve optimum take-up if a wider scheme including all stations within the Exeter area and some or all stations more widely in Devon are also equipped. That means that a fully successful pay-as-you-go scheme would depend on decision-making going beyond the scope of the Exeter to Barnstaple line modernisation scheme itself. At the date of this document, GWR only had pay-as-you-go in the western part of Cornwall (to be expanded as part of the Mid Cornwall Metro scheme), in the Bristol area, and the London-area Oyster scheme with extensions on the route to Reading. Ironically, some of the Class 150 trains used on the Barnstaple route now have advertisements in them for the Cornish pay-as-you-go scheme.

#### *13) Installing wi-fi at stations without it and improving mobile/wi-fi connectivity along the route*

Wi-fi has been available at GWR’s larger stations and at Network Rail-operated stations for a number of years. In 2019, a partnership between the Tarka Rail Association (now North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group), the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership and GWR installed wi-fi at Barnstaple station. Other than Barnstaple, currently no stations outside Exeter on the Exeter to Barnstaple line are equipped with wi-fi. Mobile connectivity along the route is generally poor, with many ‘not-spots’. As well impairing the use of mobile phones, the quality of on-train wi-fi systems also suffer as a result of the poor mobile connectivity.

The new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan*<sup>188</sup> adopted in July 2025 says that improving mobile connectivity is a priority: “Enhancing mobile connectivity on trains could however make journeys more productive and more enjoyable. This is a priority for the region and Devon and Torbay continue to work in partnership with Peninsula Transport and the rail industry to explore funding opportunities.”

Passenger expectations about on-line connectivity continue to rise at the same time as ever more transactions become digital by default. Increasingly, on-line connectivity is taken as a standard, not a nice to have add-on. Station wi-fi would enable passengers to use waiting time more productively to work and socialise and would allow the use of mobile devices where reception is poor to access information about ticketing and train and other transport services. Improved information provision at stations about disruption and changes to train service, both through on-station equipment and passengers’ own devices, would be possible.

<sup>185</sup> <https://www.nationalrail.co.uk/tickets-railcards-and-offers/buying-a-ticket/pay-as-you-go-with-contactless/>

<sup>186</sup> *English Devolution White Paper – Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth*, 16 December 2024: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-devolution-white-paper-power-and-partnership-foundations-for-growth/english-devolution-white-paper>

<sup>187</sup> *Peninsula Rail Strategy*, Peninsula Transport, July 2023.

<sup>188</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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Better on-train mobile connectivity would help those wanting to work during their journeys or enjoy on-line entertainment, including via the on-train wi-fi system, and would help make the train service more competitive with other transport modes. The *Peninsula Rail Strategy*<sup>189</sup> includes a priority to “support flexible lifestyles with consistent data connectivity”. Cornwall Council has already equipped almost every station in Cornwall with wi-fi as part of a wider drive to create a connected county

As well as electrical power supply, stations to be equipped with wi-fi would need suitable connections to the internet. An audit of station facilities would be necessary before deciding which stations to prioritise. Improving mobile connectivity would need an audit of the ‘not-spots’ and the feasibility/cost of remediating them, including the preparedness of the relevant mobile operators to cooperate with such a scheme.

The Government has announced Project Reach<sup>190</sup>, a public-private partnership between Network Rail and telecoms companies Neos Networks and Freshwave “to kickstart economic growth with ultra fast fibre optic cable across 1,000 kilometres of major rail lines.” According to the statement, initially, the London to Cardiff and Penzance parts of the Great Western Main Line would be upgraded, but not other routes such as Exeter to Barnstaple.

Another possibility, given the potentially very high costs of filling ‘not-spots’ solely for rail use, is satellite-enabled wi-fi and ‘direct-to-device’ functionality. It is understood<sup>191</sup> that the lack of connectivity on the Far North Line in Scotland between Inverness and Thurso/Wick is planned to be filled on a trial basis by fitting Starlink 4G/5G satellite equipment to the Class 158 trains operating on the route. This would obviate the need for the high costs of installing new masts.

In a Written Answer on 14 October 2025 to a question from Clive Jones MP Kanishka Narayan MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology said<sup>192</sup>: “Our ambition is for all populated areas to have higher quality standalone 5G by 2030. In the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy (June 2025), the Government committed to work with Ofcom and other regulators to assess the telecommunications needs of the transport sector by December 2026. My officials are undertaking this assessment alongside the Department for Transport and the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority. The Department for Transport also recently secured funding to introduce low-earth-orbit satellite connectivity on all mainline trains, which will significantly improve both the availability and internet data connection speeds for Wi-Fi connected passengers.”

Following that parliamentary statement, GWR has undertaken a trial of improved on-train wi-fi as part of a trial sponsored by Peninsula Transport<sup>193</sup> of a ‘hybrid’ approach combining land-based 5G with satellite



connectivity. The system has been tested successfully on a GWR-operated IET train equipped with the new technology by Hitachi, working with Applied Motion using an approach developed for F1 racing cars.

GWR’s presentation stand at Paddington station in November 2025 (photos: author) explained that: “This hybrid system actively seeks the best signal from both ground-based cellular masts and satellites, ensuring reliable, superfast connectivity. ... This technology removes the need for costly trackside infrastructure, making it scalable across the UK rail network and adaptable for other transport systems too.” The system also enables improved remote fleet monitoring for improved maintenance and reliability of the train fleet. This ‘hybrid’ approach appears to

<sup>189</sup> *Peninsula Rail Strategy*, Peninsula Transport, July 2023.

<sup>190</sup> 26 June 2025: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/on-track-and-online-landmark-deal-dead-zones>

<sup>191</sup> Article ‘Connecting the Far North’ in *Modern Railways* magazine, November 2024.

<sup>192</sup> <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-09-16/77832>

<sup>193</sup> Peninsula Transport post on LinkedIn, 18 November 2025: [Peninsula Transport presents UK’s first ‘next generation’ Superfast Wi-Fi Pilot. Peninsula Transport, in partnership with Motion Applied \(formerly McLaren Applied\), Great Western Railway \(GWR\)... | Peninsula Transport](#)

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be the most cost-effective approach for the Barnstaple line and has the benefit of being locally sponsored by Peninsula Transport with the active involvement of GWR, Network Rail and Hitachi.

### 14) Creating improved, safer access for pedestrians and other users: better usability for all

This section covers accessibility between the train and the platform, accessibility between the platform and the station entrance and between the station entrance and the public domain: it addresses the usability of points of access to the line for current and potential users.

A route such as Exeter to Barnstaple has attracted relatively little funding for station accessibility improvements. The two main sources in recent years have been the Department for Transport's Access for All fund and the Minor Works fund in the rail franchise agreements. The former has focused on lift installation, typically at medium and larger stations, while the latter focused on smaller improvements for disabled people and others with restricted mobility.

**Table 3.1** Slips, trips and falls were the main cause of mainline non-workforce severe injuries in stations  
Mainline non-workforce severe injuries in stations, Great Britain, annual data, April 2022 to March 2023

Severe injury category	Number of injuries
Slips, trips and falls	574
Platform edge incidents	195
Contact with object	48
Assault and abuse	28
Other injuries	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>862</b>

Source: RSSB Annual Health and Safety Report April 2022 to March 2023

Improved accessibility should also improve safety at stations, in particular slips, trips and falls. The adjacent chart from the Office of Rail and Road annual safety report<sup>194</sup> shows how slips and falls are by far the biggest class of accident among passengers across the country generally.

The *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>195</sup> (LTP) says that: "We will also work with partners to improve the

accessibility of stations" towards the wider 'Easier Travel' part of the LTP overall vision for transport in the

Station	Priority	Accessibility Category	GWR Notes
Barnstaple		A	Staffed. Wheelchairs available. Step-free access available to the platform.
Chapelton		B2	Step-free access available to the single platform, this is a short path and platform end ramp.
Umberleigh		A	Step-free access to the platform.
Portsmouth Arms		A	Step-free access to the platform.
Kings Nympton		A	Step-free access to the platform.
Eggesford	①	B1	Step-free access possible to both platforms. Inter-platform access is via a level crossing.
Lapford	②	C	This station does not have step-free access to the platforms.
Morchard Road		A	Step-free access to the platform.
Copplestone	②	B2	Step-free access available to sole platform. However, wheelchair users cannot alight/board from this station due to narrow platforms.
Yeoford	①	B2	This station has a degree of step-free access. However, the only platform can be accessed via steep ramp from the road.
Crediton	①	B1	Step-free access available to Exeter platform, step-free access to Barnstaple-bound platform is via local roads and level crossing.
Newton St Cyres		B1	This station has step-free access to the platform, however this is off a steep approach road.
<b>Station Accessibility Categories</b>			
Category A	This station has step-free access to all platforms / the platform		
Category B1	Step-free access to all platforms - may include long or steep ramps. Access between platforms may be via the street		
Category B2	Some step-free access to all platforms		
Category B3	Some step-free access, may be in one direction only		
Category C	This station does not have step-free access to any platform		

areas covered. The *Peninsula Rail Strategy*<sup>196</sup> includes a priority to "develop a set of station standards to prioritise investment towards a network that is accessible and welcoming to all".

The adjacent table uses station accessibility information for each of the stations on the Exeter to Barnstaple line taken from the *GWR Facilities Guide*<sup>197</sup>.

The perverse position shown by the table is that, with the exception of Barnstaple, the most-used stations have the poorest accessibility, while the least-used tend to be more accessible. The table includes an early attempt to provide a sense of priority for remedial action. It is based on a combination of level of usage together with severity of impediment to easy access.

The following comments provide

further background on the different challenges at each station highlighted in the table:

- **Crediton:** This is by far the largest in usage terms of the intermediate stations, the fastest growing in usage following the increase in services after the reopening of the Okehampton line and also an interchange point for any passengers from the Barnstaple direction wanting to travel to Okehampton and vice versa.

<sup>194</sup> <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/ktvneim0/rail-safety-2022-23.pdf>

<sup>195</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>196</sup> *Peninsula Rail Strategy*, Peninsula Transport, July 2023.

<sup>197</sup> Dated 2023. The *Facilities Guide* appears to have been removed from the GWR public website.

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As can be seen from the adjacent photo (author), the road across the level crossing is narrow, with only a narrow painted area on the left for wheelchair or other passengers who need to cross to the Barnstaple platform without using the footbridge.

While the end of the Exeter direction platform is close to the road and associated level crossing at this point, access is blocked off. This means that access for wheelchair users and others who cannot use the footbridge is via Station Approach and Station Road (“local roads” in the GWR *Facilities Guide*), as shown in the adjacent extract from Google Maps. Subject to further investigation and design, a combination of unblocking the access from the Exeter direction platform end and improvements to the local road could give substantial benefits to users.



- **Yeoford:** This was once a key junction station, where passengers between Northern Devon and West Devon, Plymouth and North Cornwall could interchange between trains. Access is via a ramp from Station Road. Station Road is a narrow unlit country lane without pavements that connects low-density built-up areas on both sides of the railway line, with the larger area of habitation being on the south west side of the railway away from the remaining platform.



The adjacent photo (author) shows Yeoford station from the Station Road bridge looking south towards Exeter. The disused island platform can be seen on the right, together with the flat area of gravel on the far right hand side being the former station goods yard.

If funding for the conversion of the current pair of single lines between Crediton and the former Coleford Junction via Yeoford was achieved, as described in the section on creating a dynamic loop between Newton St Cyres and

Crediton, it would be necessary to reinstate a second platform at Yeoford. Subject to further design work, that would enable the more easily graded entrance on the south west side of the station to be brought back into use. Together with a lift bridge (or other accessible solution), that would ensure full accessibility to both platforms, while also meaning that the larger part of the local population could access the station without having to cross the Station Road bridge.

- **Eggesford:** This station, as the other passing place alongside Crediton, retains two platforms. All passengers for the Barnstaple line platform to the right of the photo (author) must use the level crossing using the path marked in white, as the station has no footbridge. As a barriered level crossing, there is a risk of late-arriving passengers attempting to cross the line in unsafe ways. The Exeter-bound platform to the left in the photo cannot be accessed direct from the road. Instead, passengers must pass round the privately-owned former station house behind the shrubs to access the platform. Further significant issues about the way the public highways interface with the railway at this point are discussed in the section on improving road layouts at key level crossings.



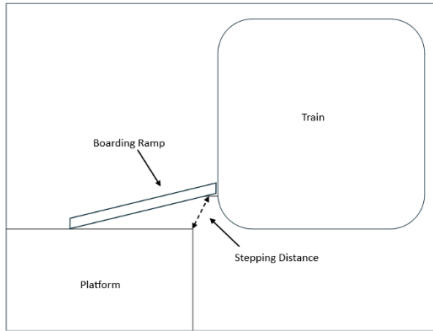
Subject to further consideration, there appear to be no simple solutions for the combination of accessibility and road-rail interface issues at Eggesford station. Solutions may only be found in a more thoroughgoing review of the overall structure of the interface between the highways and the railway at this location.

- **Copplestone:** The problem with this station is the interface between the train and the platform rather than between the platform and the public highway. The following diagram (author) shows how a

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boarding ramp is currently used at most stations to bridge the 'stepping distance' between the edge of station platforms and the train. The 'stepping distance' comprises the combined vertical and horizontal divergences between the train and the platform edge.



The issue at Coplestone as described in GWR's *Facilities Guide* is that the platform is too narrow to allow the boarding ramp to be set up so that it can be used safely by a wheelchair user.

Widening the platform to allow ramp use could be both a costly and suboptimal solution to the Coplestone problem. A better solution, which would achieve far better accessibility

and which would also reduce delays derived from the use of a ramp, could result from new train introduction as explored further in the section covering that topic.



The new Stadler-built Class 745 and 755 trains operated by Greater Anglia combine lower than traditional floors in the door areas with sliding steps that automatically emerge from the train body when the train is at a station (adjacent photo of Class 755: author). Providing a 'Harrington hump'<sup>198</sup> is provided at unusually low platforms, the result is near-level boarding without the need for ramps at most stations. Currently, not all new British trains have this boarding feature, but it is becoming common on European rolling stock and could be a highly attractive feature providing

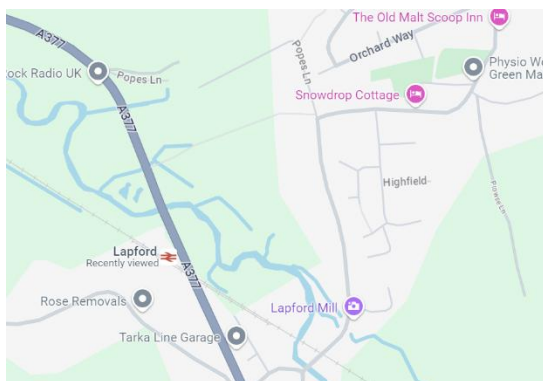
significantly improved accessibility as part of a new regional fleet for GWR.

- **Lapford:** The key problem with Lapford is not just that the access route to the station from the public highway is via a set of steep steps inaccessible for wheelchair users and others with restricted mobility, but that the steps give straight onto the carriageway of the busy A377 road, which has neither a pavement for pedestrians nor any form of lighting (photo: author).



An alternative route to the station runs parallel to the A377 for a short while and is less steep, but also leads straight to the A377. The main area of habitation is only a short distance from the station as the crow

flies, but the only direct walking route involves an unpaved path and part of the A377 with no pavement or lighting (map below: Google Maps).



Other than stopping on the main southbound carriageway of the A377, there is nowhere for 'kiss & ride' passengers to be dropped off to access the station.

Like Eggesford, Lapford is a situation where a combined rail and road solution may be needed. A different potential solution which has been mooted to the author of this document would involve using undeveloped railway land adjacent to the railway line to the south of the A377 road bridge to develop a new approach to the station. Another solution might be to improve the unmetalled footpath

signposted to the station from Popes Lane which joins the A377 to the north of the station, to provide a

<sup>198</sup> A cheaply-constructed short section of raised platform, now widely used to assist access from low platforms. One issue with these humps is that changes in train type can result in them being wrongly positioned on the platform.

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pedestrian-controlled crossing over the A377 and to construct a pavement to the station entrance along the A377.

A study of options and consultation with local users and residents would be an important prelude to establishing a concrete plan of action.

- *Umberleigh*: This is not shown in the GWR-based table because the issue is the narrow access road to the station rather than the station itself. The access road is marked for car parking on both sides to maximise parking space. At peak hours, the access road carriageway fills up with cars delivering and picking up 'kiss & ride' passengers as well as those attempting to park or to leave the station. With few houses in the immediate vicinity, better access by car, both for parking and 'kiss & ride'/taxis is the imperative here. As discussed earlier, the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>199</sup> suggests Umberleigh as a possible location for a new type of 'Hub & Ride' site addressing these shortcomings.

#### 15) Improving road layouts at key level crossings for the safety of road and rail users

The railway has generally considered the improvement of safety at road level crossings as a matter for the railway alone to address. Following the loss of traditional gates managed by manual signal boxes or crossing keepers, the railway has generally done so with improved level crossing protection in the form of lights, barriers and vehicle detection, with closure or provision of a grade separated crossing such as a bridge in the highest risk locations.

However, some crossings on the Exeter to Barnstaple line are configured on the road side to such a suboptimal extent, having originally been designed before the development of modern motor traffic that formal consideration should be given to roads-based improvements too. Examples include the Salmon Pool level crossing north of Crediton and Eggesford level crossing south of the station.



The photo on the following page (author) shows the level crossing at the south side of Eggesford station. The photo shows how the unclassified road continuing from the B3042 to Wembworthy crosses the railway only a handful of metres after crossing the A377, which itself is on a tight curve with poor sightlines. The unclassified road on the far side approaches the railway over a humped river bridge, impairing the view ahead and the stop line on it for the A377 is closer to the railway than the length of many road vehicles. None of the roads have pavements for pedestrians or cycle lanes and there is no road lighting. All passengers from/for the

Barnstaple-direction platform not approaching from the river direction must cross the level crossing using the path marked in white.

At this point, the railway is itself on a curve, with poor sightlines. All trains must therefore come to a full stop when approaching Eggesford station from the south, with a special pull-cord mechanism provided which the driver can operate from his window to actuate the level crossing gates. Similarly, all trains heading south must stop at the end of the platform, with the level crossing operated by the train guard from a platform-mounted box.

The author has witnessed a southbound articulated lorry approach the railway crossing over the A377 from the B3042 to the unclassified road as the railway crossing barriers were being lowered, resulting in the vehicle blocking the A377 in both directions.

While it is recognised that there may be no easy answers, if Devon County Council does agree to sponsor the further development of the Exeter to Barnstaple line modernisation scheme, as overall transport authority in Devon, it would be best placed to review options for anachronistic road-rail interface configurations from the horse-drawn era persisting at several locations on the route.

<sup>199</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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The Road Safety section of the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>200</sup> includes the following relevant statement: “In line with the Vision Zero South West ambition, there will be continued investment in improvements to ensure that every route and every mode is available to everybody, free from the risk of fear or harm. ... We recognise that how safe people feel can also be a barrier to travel. We will explore what new approaches would help to provide more information and how we can consider this information in the design and prioritisation of projects and maintenance.”

#### *Train Accessibility and Capacity*

The section on station accessibility explores options for improving station accessibility that both involve infrastructure changes and the use of new trains such as the Stadler-constructed Class 745/755, which feature lower floors than than traditional British trains and special automatic steps to fill the gap between the platform and the train. Such trains or similar ones from other manufacturers which might be offered for the British market would both improve accessibility for disabled people and others with restricted mobility or with luggage, baby buggies, etc, and improve safety by removing a key cause of trips and falls.

Capacity is another key objective of the modernisation scheme. The overall vision for improved capacity includes both longer and more frequent trains. Three-coach trains were introduced post-2019 after some platforms such as Eggesford were lengthened. However, running longer than three-coach trains is problematic with the current rolling stock.

When coupled, Class 16X trains can run in 4-car, 5-car and 6-car formations. However, there are no passenger gangways between the individual units and the trains do not have selective door opening (SDO), which means it is not possible to stop them at shorter platforms and guarantee that passengers can both alight and board from all coaches. The Class 158 trains also do not have full SDO, but do have unit end gangways allowing passengers and the guard to pass along the whole train. Instead, both types of train can allow alighting and board from a single door. While that is acceptable for very low passenger numbers, it can cause delays with larger numbers and cause issues for wheelchairs, bikes, baby buggies, etc. It is normal for new trains to have full SDO and GWR has indicated that in principal it would be willing to operate longer trains at shorter platforms in this mode.

At the date of this document it had been recently confirmed that GWR had taken a lease on 26 Class 175 DMUs formerly used by Transport for Wales. The plans are understood to include the introduction of these more modern trains (constructed 1999 to 2001) on the Barnstaple line during the course of 2026 and that the plans also include the potential use of the trains in up to 5-car formations.

#### *Could train service frequency be increased in the future?*

Some rail reinstatement schemes such as the Borders Railway and the Ebbw Vale line have been criticised for early decisions on project scope that limit the potential for train service expansion in the future or where expansion could only be achieved at the significant additional cost of further construction works. For example, some bridges have been built on the Borders Railway only capable of accommodating single track (the route was originally a full double-track main line). On the Ebbw Vale railway, the expansion of services to include direct trains to Newport was only possible by building an additional loop once the line was in public service.

In order to provide answers to such questions, it would be worth undertaking a study of the maximum operable train service that a scheme designed to accommodate a two-trains per hour service could accommodate. It is likely that the answer for a service of acceptable punctuality is two trains per hour (together with the Okehampton service at the southern end of the route) and that significant further works would be necessary to accommodate a higher level of service. A four trains per hour frequency is usually considered to be a ‘turn-up-and-go’ level of ‘metro’ service and would be unprecedented for a route such as the Exeter to Barnstaple railway.

A more sensible and worthwhile question for an operability study would be whether the upgraded route, in particular in the light of the introduction of a dynamic loop between Newton St Cyres and the former Coleford Junction, could support an increase in train service frequency to Okehampton from hourly to two trains per hour. The fact that the Okehampton Interchange new station is currently under construction makes such a

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<sup>200</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

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study even more relevant. It would also be consistent with aspiration in the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>201</sup> for the ‘Devon Metro’ to have: “at least half hourly frequency on all rail lines into Exeter.”

*Would the Exeter to Barnstaple modernisation scheme be compatible with a higher frequency of train service across central Exeter?*

An increase in frequency of the service across the city to Digby & Sowton from two trains an hour to four is including in the new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040* adopted in July 2025<sup>202</sup>. This says: “The ‘Devon Metro’ rail network will be made more attractive by improving connectivity between Exeter and surrounding towns. The aspirations include: ... A 15-minute rail frequency between Exeter Central and Digby & Sowton stations delivered by extending the Barnstaple service route across Exeter.” This issue is also discussed in the Management Case.

*Electrification of the Exeter to Barnstaple route?*

Given the emphasis on sustainability, there will doubtless be questions about why this document does not recommend electrification of the Exeter to Barnstaple route. The most in-depth recent analysis of the potential for rail electrification is the *Traction Decarbonisation Network Strategy Interim Programme Business Case*<sup>203</sup> (TDNS) published by Network Rail in July 2020. The TDNS is a set of recommendations to Government, but no official response appears to have been given.

The TDNS includes the following summary of its findings:

Emissions Reduction	Surface Transport Decarbonisation	Passenger and Freight End User	Direct Rail Benefits	Environmental Benefits	Wider Economy Benefits
<b>The Case for Change</b>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Climate Change is a global threat</li> <li>- Paris Agreement has set ambitious targets for global average temperature rise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rail is already a green mode of transport</li> <li>- Could support surface transport decarbonisation through accommodating some modal shift</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reliability and resilience need to be improved</li> <li>- Capacity shortfall in areas of the network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rail requires significant investment for ongoing operations, maintenance and renewals.</li> <li>- Cost efficiency is critical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Introduction of ULEZ and CAZ around the UK</li> <li>- Strong focus on air quality from local, regional and national governments.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- UK Net-Zero Target</li> <li>- Getting to Net Zero requires significant infrastructure investment</li> </ul>
<b>Strategic Objectives</b>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Net Zero GHG by 2050 for UK as a whole</li> <li>- Other national and regional targets and aspirations for pre 2050</li> <li>- NR science-based target of 27.5% reduction for traction by 2029</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Modal shift from road and air to rail</li> <li>- Even better if rail is decarbonised</li> <li>- Additional investment required to increase capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improving resilience to allow customers to be able to rely on rail</li> <li>- Increasing capacity improves customer experience and opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Achieving cost efficiency provides sustainable pricing for passengers, customers and government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide a longer-term solution to air quality issues</li> <li>- Support decision making from rail industry Air Quality Strategic Framework for short-term solutions required</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Traction decarbonisation programme will require skilled workers around the UK to deliver infrastructure and rolling stock.</li> </ul>
<b>Strategic Benefits</b>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ending rail's contribution to emission through removal of diesel trains</li> <li>- Optimising carbon reduction through optimised cascade of cleanest compliant diesel trains where possible.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safety improvements for users compared with roads</li> <li>- Congestion reduction on roads</li> <li>- Road maintenance cost savings benefits</li> <li>- Cross-Modal cost saving with combined refuelling/recharging infrastructure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Faster journeys</li> <li>- Improved reliability</li> <li>- Greater tonnes hauled in same train paths</li> <li>- Improved resilience through electrifying diversionary routes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reduced rolling stock maintenance costs</li> <li>- Reduced track access charges</li> <li>- Reduced fuel costs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Longer-term air quality solution for stations, depots and freight.</li> <li>- Supporting rail industry Air Quality Strategic Framework</li> <li>- Noise reduction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increase jobs in design, integration, management, manufacturing and construction</li> <li>- "Level Up" economy through job creation away from London and South East</li> </ul>

As well as extensive analysis, the TDNS includes a map showing “Recommended technology deployment to decarbonise the unelectrified UK railway”. The Exeter to Barnstaple line is included as an electrification recommendation under the category ‘Multiple (proposed electrification)’, but with an important caveat covered by the ‘multiple’ descriptor. That reflects the following more

detailed commentary in Annex 8 to the TDNS: “This route [Barnstaple] is recommended as a candidate for full electrification or else hydrogen, since it is not ideally suited for battery technology (only). This is because of the relatively long travel distance and high-speed performance that would be required (line speeds up to 85mph are currently being planned); together with the limited opportunity for main line recharging. There would also be significant operational challenges in maintaining the current timetables, based on the likely requirements for recharging time (c. 15 minutes), particularly at the Barnstaple end. Journey time improvements and capacity enhancements for Barnstaple-Exeter are under active consideration through the North Devon Line study. This work is being co-ordinated with proposals to reintroduce regular passenger services on the Okehampton-Exeter route, which shares some of the same infrastructure. Any new technology could be developed in a consistent manner for the network serving Exeter, including the routes from Barnstaple, Okehampton and Exmouth.”

The TDNS was an initial study with a focus on providing answers to how the Government’s 2040 target date for eliminating pure diesel trains from the national rail network could be met. While it produced recommendations on each route in the country to give a view of a final end-state, given the enormous complexities of the task, it

<sup>201</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>202</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>203</sup> <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Traction-Decarbonisation-Network-Strategy-Interim-Programme-Business-Case.pdf>

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did not attempt to produce a detailed line-by-line implementation programme: “The recommendations do not indicate a delivery prioritisation and simply represent the end-state position for traction decarbonisation. The recommendations are far reaching and will require a significant period of time to deliver and their delivery may extend beyond 2050 in order to maximise efficiency and minimise disruption to the network. As such, in order to achieve zero emissions by 2050 there may be a need to deploy interim solutions for certain areas. This notion begins to be explored in the 77 OFFICIAL commentary provided alongside the recommendations but will need further consideration as the programme of decarbonisation emerges as part of the PBC.”

The TDNS also notes the enormity of the task. Only 38% of the network<sup>204</sup> is electrified. Of the 15,800 route km of the network, 9,800 km remain unelectrified. While the map does not indicate dates, some TDNS principles strongly suggest that a route such as Exeter to Barnstaple is unlikely to be a candidate for early electrification. A key principle is the emphasis put on the need for efficiency, which leads to the conclusion that electrification would be ‘progressive’, with routes building on existing electrification. Nowhere is there a suggestion that single routes should be created as electrification ‘islands’ separate from the rest of the electrified network.

For Barnstaple to become part of a wider full electrification scheme, it would need to piggyback on electrification from one or both of Bristol Parkway (79 miles from Exeter St Davids) or Newbury (135 miles from Exeter). Without doing that, a Barnstaple electrification scheme would benefit from none of the economies of scale of being part of a wider scheme, with matters such as the connection to the National Grid<sup>205</sup>, electrical control systems, project work sites and experienced personnel and equipment having to be procured on a standalone basis. Given the huge challenges elsewhere and no indication of the connecting routes from Bristol or Newbury likely to be early priorities for electrification, it is very hard to see that Network Rail would agree to prioritise Barnstaple as an island of standalone electrification. In a similar manner to signalling, there would be competition for resources with schemes with a far higher priority in national terms.

When that that background is set against the fact that since the publication of the TDNS in 2020 relatively little progress has been made on electrification on the wider national network itself, it is very hard to see that a recommendation for early electrification of the Exeter to Barnstaple route could taken seriously. However, that is not the same as saying that it could never happen.

Instead, the conclusion at this stage is similar to the conclusion drawn in relation to the potential conversion of the route to tram-train style operation. It would be very high risk for a local authority sponsoring a route modernisation scheme to attempt to create a case for full route electrification outside a clear wider programme allowing the route to benefit from connection to electrification at Exeter. Instead, as the modernisation scheme progresses, horizon scanning should be used to understand how the wider landscape is developing and the extent to which in the fullness of time it might become feasible for the TDNS recommendations (or recommendations of any successor studies) to be implemented.

The comments in this section should also be seen in the light of GWR’s emerging plans for the replacement of its older DMU fleet. It is understood from GWR that its emerging preference is for its older DMU fleet to be replaced by a fleet of new battery trains. GWR’s experience with an experimental battery train on the Greenford branch have been published in a white paper: *Fast-charge battery technology: A viable option for regional rail?*<sup>206</sup>. GWR Managing Director Mark Hopwood says in the Foreword: “We’ve shown that the technology works” and that such trains could have substantial cost and reliability benefits over the diesel trains they replace”. The Executive Summary concludes: “These tools give GWR confidence that fast-charge battery trains could help deliver services across branch lines in the Thames Valley and in Devon and Cornwall, including the long line from Exeter to Barnstaple.” The concept involves short sections of electrification in the Exeter area. The Management Case covers the potential procurement of such trains in more depth.

#### *London Waterloo and/or other longer-distance services?*

The Exeter to Barnstaple route originally formed part of the London & South Western Railway and then the Southern Railway route between London and Devon/Cornwall. Through trains and through carriages worked

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<sup>204</sup> Only the Network Rail network is considered: HS1, HS2, East West Rail, London Underground, other GB networks and Northern Ireland are excluded.

<sup>205</sup> For 25 kV overhead electrification, a long timescale and complex operation, which without further detailed investigation cannot even be confirmed to be feasible for a route such as Exeter to Barnstaple on a standalone basis.

<sup>206</sup> <https://www.gwr.com/-/media/gwr-sc-website/files/about-gwr/what-you-can-expect/sustainability/GWR-fast-charge-whitepaper-010725.pdf>

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over the route to/from London Waterloo and continued for some years under British Rail. There have been calls for the route to host through services to/from London Waterloo again, including in the *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>207</sup>.

This document does not recommend the introduction of such through services. In principle, subject to suitable paths via Exeter being found, a modernised route could host such train services. The following arguments against that approach have been identified, in particular focusing on how such train services could risk the achievement of key scheme objectives:

- One of the key objectives of the modernisation scheme is to improve the currently poor operational performance on the route. The Waterloo to Exeter route west of Salisbury experienced similar infrastructure rationalisation as the Barnstaple route in British Rail days, with the route now being predominantly single track with some passing places. Accordingly, it suffers similar performance problems to the Barnstaple route. Connecting the two lines would seriously risk importing delays and cancellations<sup>208</sup> to the Barnstaple line and vice versa and thus negating a key benefit of the money spent on the modernisation scheme;
- The journey time between London Waterloo and Exeter St Davids is materially longer than from London Paddington at typically around 3 hours 25 minutes compared to typically around 2 hours 10 minutes for the regular fast Paddington services. One of the aims of the modernisation scheme is to encourage more passengers to undertake longer-distance services wholly by train by giving better, more regular connections at Exeter St Davids. An irregular through service to/from Waterloo based essentially on an old precedent with few major other destinations en route is unlikely to attract large numbers of through passengers. The Waterloo service already has a very low market share of the London to Exeter market (just 0.99% of journeys from Exeter St Davids and 0.44% of journeys from Exeter Central<sup>209</sup>); and
- Through Waterloo services would be incompatible with the separate long-term aspiration (including in the new *Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-2040*<sup>210</sup>) to create a 15-minute 'metro'-frequency service across Exeter to Digby & Sowton. That is because through Waterloo services from Barnstaple would not be able to operate to Digby & Sowton, creating a break in the recurring 2 TPH service pattern which would be used to create an overall 4 TPH service. The Strategic Case notes that Digby & Sowton is already one of the key destinations from stations on the Barnstaple line. With the eastern side of Exeter continuing to see a high level of housing development, new employment and large numbers of events at Sandy Park stadium, Digby & Sowton usage is only likely to grow. If a choice is to be made, it would therefore have priority over through Waterloo services.

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<sup>207</sup><https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>

<sup>208</sup> There would be a risk of seriously delayed Waterloo trains being cancelled short at Exeter St Davids in order to prevent them further delaying other trains on their return journeys.

<sup>209</sup> <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/richard.rowson/viz/RailODManalysis2022-23/Topdestinationsbystation>

<sup>210</sup> <https://www.devon.gov.uk/roads-and-transport/traffic-information/transport-planning/devon-local-transport-plan-4-2025-2040/>



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STATIONS		SAVINGS																							
		Exmouth	Topsham	Digby & Sowton	Exeter Central	Exeter St Davids	Newton St Cyres	Crediton	Yeoford	Okehampton	Copplestone	Morchard Road	Lapford	Eggesford	Eggesford	Kings Nympton	Portsmouth Arms	Umberleigh	Chapelton	Barnstaple					
	d	-	-	0855	-	0955	1021	1055	1122	1157	1226	1257	1324	1357	1424	1457	1524	1557	1624	1658	1724	1758	1825		
	d	-	-	0907	-	1007	1033	1105	1135	1210	1238	1310	1336	1408	1436	1509	1536	1608	1636	1708	1737	1810	1837		
	d	-	-	0914	-	1013	1040	1112	1141	1217	1245	1316	1343	1414	1443	1515	1543	1614	1643	1715	1743	1816	1844		
	d	-	0838	0912	0932	1013	1031	1114	1133	1214	1231	1314	1332	1414	1432	1514	1532	1611	1632	1714	1732	1814	1839	1914	
	d	-	0834	0843	0920	0937	1018	1037	1119	1138	1219	1239	1319	1338	1419	1438	1522	1538	1619	1638	1720	1743	1819	1849	1919
	d	-	-	0927x	-	1023x	1044x	-	-	1225x	-	-	-	-	-	-	1626x	-	-	-	-	-	1925x		
	a	0844	0853	0932	0949	1029	1050	1129	1150	1230	1252	1328	1349	1428	1447	1531	1549	1631	1649	1730	1753	1829	1858	1931	
	d	0845	0853	0933	0951	1032	1051	1132	1150	1232	1252	1330	1350	1429	1450	1531	1550	1632	1651	1730	1754	1830	1859	1932	
	d	-	-	0939x	-	1038x	-	1138x	-	1238x	-	1336x	-	1435x	-	1537x	-	1638x	-	1736x	-	1836x	-	1938x	
	a	-	0922	-	1019	-	1119	-	1218	-	1320	-	1418	-	1518	-	1618	-	1719	-	1822	-	1927		
	d	-	-	0944	-	1043	-	1143	-	1243	-	1341	-	1440	-	1542	-	1643	-	1741	-	1841	-	1943	
	d	-	-	0946x	-	1045x	-	1146x	-	1246x	-	1343x	-	1443x	-	1545x	-	1645x	-	1744x	-	1843x	-	1946x	
	d	-	-	0951x	-	-	-	-	-	1250x	-	-	-	-	-	-	1650x	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	a	0906	-	1001	-	1057	-	1158	-	1300	-	1355	-	1455	-	1557	-	1700	-	1756	-	1855	-	1958	
	d	0910	-	1004	-	1104	-	1205	-	1302	-	1402	-	1503	-	1600	-	1702	-	1803	-	1903	-	2002	
	d	-	-	1009x	-	-	-	-	-	1307x	-	-	-	-	-	-	1708x	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	-	1014x	-	-	-	-	-	1312x	-	-	-	-	-	-	1713x	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	-	1020x	-	1118x	-	1219x	-	1318x	-	1416x	-	1517x	-	1613x	-	1718x	-	1817x	-	1917x	-	2016x	
	d	-	-	1024x	-	-	-	-	-	1322x	-	-	-	-	-	-	1723x	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	a	0932	-	1033	-	1128	-	1229	-	1331	-	1426	-	1527	-	1624	-	1732	-	1827	-	1927	-	2026	
	d	1859	-	1959	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	1911	-	2012	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	1917	-	2018	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	1924	2011	2040	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	1947	2017	2120	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2024x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	a	1957	2030	2131	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	1958	2031	2131	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2037x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	a	2026	-	2159	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2042	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2045x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2049x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	a	-	2059	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2102	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2107x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2112x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2118x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	d	-	2122x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		
	a	-	2131	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		

### BARNSTAPLE AND OKEHAMPTON TO EXETER (THE TARKA AND DARTMOOR LINES)

MONDAYS TO FRIDAYS	Notes	B																						
		Barnstaple	Chapelton	Umberleigh	Portsmouth Arms	Kings Nympton	Eggesford	Eggesford	Lapford	Morchard Road	Copplestone	Okehampton	Yeoford	Crediton	Crediton	Newton St Cyres	Exeter St Davids	Exeter Central	Digby & Sowton	Topsham	Exmouth			
	d	0625	-	0722	-	0835	-	0935	-	1035	-	1135	-	1235	-	1335	-	1435	-	1535	-	1631	-	1733
	d	-	-	0727x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1738x
	d	0633x	-	0732x	-	0843x	-	0943x	-	1043x	-	1143x	-	1243x	-	1343x	-	1443x	-	1543x	-	1639x	-	1743x
	d	-	-	0739x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1749x
	d	-	-	0744x	-	-	-	0953x	-	-	-	-	-	1254x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1650x
	a	0649	-	0753	-	0859	-	1002	-	1059	-	1159	-	1302	-	1359	-	1459	-	1559	-	1658	-	1801
	d	0652	-	0754	-	0901	-	1003	-	1100	-	1200	-	1303	-	1400	-	1500	-	1600	-	1703	-	1804
	d	0657x	-	0800x	-	0906x	-	-	-	1106x	-	-	-	1406x	-	-	-	1606x	-	-	-	-	1809x	
	d	0701x	-	0804x	-	0910x	-	1011x	-	1110x	-	1208x	-	1311x	-	1410x	-	1508x	-	1610x	-	1711x	-	1814x
	d	0704	-	0807	-	0913	-	1015	-	1112	-	1212	-	1315	-	1412	-	1512	-	1612	-	1715	-	1816
	d	-	0723	-	0823	-	0925	-	1023	-	1125	-	1225	-	1325	-	1424	-	1523	-	1623	-	1723	
	d	0709x	-	0813x	-	0918x	-	1019x	-	1117x	-	1216x	-	1319x	-	1417x	-	1516x	-	1617x	-	1719x	-	1822x
	a	0718	0748	0821	0848	0927	0950	1028	1048	1126	1150	1225	1250	1328	1350	1426	1449	1525	1548	1626	1648	1728	1748	1831
	d	0718	0750	0822	0850	0929	0952	1029	1051	1129	1151	1229	1253	1329	1353	1429	1451	1529	1551	1629	1651	1731	1750	1836
	d	-	-	0825x	-	-	-	0955x	-	1054x	-	-	-	1356x	-	1455x	-	-	-	1655x	-	-	-	1839x
	a	0730	0801	0835	0900	0943	1004	1041	1104	1140	1201	1241	1303	1341	1405	1441	1503	1541	1603	1640	1703	1743	1800	1851
	a	0735	0805	0839	0905	0947	1008	1045	1108	1145	1206	1245	1307	1346	1409	1446	1508	1545	1607	1645	1707	1752	1805	1856
	a	0757	0829	0859	0928	1003	1028	1100	1127	1200	1227	1300	1327	1400	1427	1500	1527	1600	1628	1702	1728	-	1831	-
	a	0804	0836	0906	0935	1010	1035	1107	1134	1207	1234	1307	1334	1407	1434	1507	1534	1607	1635	1709	1735	-	1838	-
	a	0819	0849	0919	0949	1020	1049	1117	1147	1217	1247	1317	1347	1417	1447	1517	1547	1617	1648	1721	1751	-	1851	-
		AXM																						
MONDAYS TO FRIDAYS	Notes	C										FX			FO			SM						
		Barnstaple	Chapelton	Umberleigh	Portsmouth Arms	Kings Nympton	Eggesford	Eggesford	Lapford	Morchard Road	Copplestone	Okehampton	Yeoford	Crediton	Crediton	Newton St Cyres	Exeter St Davids	Exeter Central	Digby & Sowton	Topsham	Exmouth			
	d	-	1838	-	1942	-	2041	2041	2141	-	2241	2313	0009	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	d	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	d	-	1846x	-	1950x	-	2049x	2049x	2149x	-	2249x	2321x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	d	-	-	-	-	-	2056x	2056x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	d	-	1856x	-	-	-	-	-	2200x	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	a	-	1905	-	2006	-	2106	2106	2207	-	2305	2337	0031s	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	d	-	1906	-	2007	-	2108	2108	2212	-	2306	2340	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
	d	-	1912x	-																				



**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

**Annex C**

**Stagecoach Bus Route 5B Timetable<sup>212</sup>**

Barnstaple - Bideford - Torrington - Crediton - Exeter		5B
From Sunday 4th January 2026		
MONDAYS TO FRIDAYS except Bank Holidays		
Barnstaple Bus Station	0520 0615 0900 1200 1400 1650 2245	
Barnstaple Railway Station	0525 0620 0906 1206 1406 1656 2250	
Bickington Garage	0529 0624 0912 1212 1412 1702	
Fremington New Inn	0532 0627 0915 1215 1415 1705	
Instow The Quay	0538 0633 0923 1223 1423 1713	
E-t-W Cliveden Road		2308
Bideford Quay (Stop A)	0548 0643 0933 1233 1433 1723 2315	
Landcross Chapel	0553 0648 0938 1238 1438 1728 2320	
Torrington Opposite Church	<b>Arr</b> 0603 0658 0949 1249 1449 1739 2330	
	§ § § § § § §	
Torrington Opposite Church	<b>Dep</b> 0605 0700 0952 1252 1452 1742	
Little Torrington, Rosemoor RHS Gardens	0608 0703 0956 1256 1456 1746	
Beaford Bus Shelter	0616 0711 1004 1304 1504 1754	
Dolton Barfield Road	0624 0719 1015 1315 1515 1805	
Winkleigh, The Old Parsonage	0637 0732 1027 1327 1527 1817	
North Tawton, Clock Tower	1043 1343 1543 1829	
Bow, The Square	1053 1353 1553 1839	
Morchard Road, Devonshire Dumpling	0649 0744	
Copplestone Stone	<b>Arr</b> 0655 0750 1101 1401 1600 1846	
	§ § § § § § §	
Copplestone Stone	<b>Dep</b> 0655 0750 1101 1401 1600 1846	
Crediton opp Tesco Metro	0705 0800 1111 1411 1610 1855	
Crediton Railway Station	0710 0805 1116 1416 1615 1900	
Newton St Cyres, Crown and Sceptre	0716 0811 1122 1422 1622 1906	
Duryard Cowley Bridge	0725 0820 1130 1430 1630 1913	
Exeter St Davids Station	0730 0825 1135 1435 1635 1918	
Exeter Bus Station	0737 0832 1142 1442 1642 1924	
SATURDAYS		
Barnstaple Bus Station	0520 0615 0900 1200 1400 1645 2245	
Barnstaple Railway Station	0525 0620 0906 1206 1406 1651 2250	
Bickington Garage	0529 0624 0912 1212 1412 1657	
Fremington New Inn	0532 0627 0915 1215 1415 1700	
Instow The Quay	0538 0633 0923 1223 1423 1708	
E-t-W Cliveden Road		2312
Bideford Quay (Stop A)	0548 0643 0933 1233 1433 1718 2315	
Landcross Chapel	0553 0648 0938 1238 1438 1723 2320	
Torrington Opposite Church	<b>Arr</b> 0603 0658 0949 1249 1449 1734 2330	
	§ § § § § § §	
Torrington Opposite Church	<b>Dep</b> 0605 0700 0952 1252 1452 1737	
Little Torrington, Rosemoor RHS Gardens	0608 0703 0956 1256 1456 1741	
Beaford Bus Shelter	0616 0711 1004 1304 1504 1749	
Dolton Barfield Road	0624 0719 1015 1315 1515 1800	
Winkleigh, The Old Parsonage	0637 0732 1027 1327 1527 1811	
North Tawton, Clock Tower	1043 1343 1543 1823	
Bow, The Square	1053 1353 1553 1833	
Morchard Road, Devonshire Dumpling	0649 0744	
Copplestone Stone	<b>Arr</b> 0655 0750 1101 1401 1600 1840	
	§ § § § § § §	
Copplestone Stone	<b>Dep</b> 0655 0750 1101 1401 1600 1840	
Crediton opp Tesco Metro	0705 0800 1111 1411 1610 1850	
Crediton Railway Station	0710 0805 1116 1416 1615 1855	
Newton St Cyres, Crown and Sceptre	0716 0811 1122 1422 1622 1901	
Duryard Cowley Bridge	0725 0820 1130 1430 1630 1908	
Exeter St Davids Station	0730 0825 1135 1435 1635 1913	
Exeter Bus Station	0740 0835 1145 1445 1645 1922	

§ This bus continues as a through service with through tickets available and passengers can remain on the bus.

<sup>212</sup> [stagecoachbus.com](http://stagecoachbus.com) – Live Bus Times and Timetables

# EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION

## PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE

Exeter - Crediton - Torrington - Bideford - Barnstaple

5B

From Sunday 4th January 2026

### MONDAYS TO FRIDAYS except Bank Holidays

Exeter Bus Station		0830	1000	1400	1645	1740	2015	
Exeter St Davids Station		0840	1010	1410	1655	1750	2023	
Duryard, Cowley Bridge		0846	1016	1416	1701	1756	2028	
Newton St Cyres, Crown and Sceptre		0853	1023	1423	1708	1803	2035	
Crediton Railway Station		0643	0859	1029	1429	1714	1809	2041
Crediton Lloyds Bank		0648	0904	1034	1434	1719	1814	2046
Copplestone Stone	Arr	0656	0912	1042	1442	1727	1822	2054
		8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Copplestone Stone	Dep	0656	0912	1042	1442	1727	1822	2054
Bow, Iter Park		0703	0919	1049	1449		1829	2101
North Tawton, The Square		0713	0929	1059	1501		1839	2111
Marchard Road, Devonshire Dumping					1731			
Winkleigh Turn		0724	0940	1110	1514	1743	1850	2121
Dolton Barfield Road		0735	0951	1121	1527	1754	1901	2131
Beaford Bus Shelter		0744	1000	1130	1536	1803	1909	2139
Little Torrington, Rosemoor RHS Gardens		0750	1006	1136	1542	1809	1915	2145
Great Torrington Church	Arr	0756	1012	1142	1548	1815	1921	2151
		8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Great Torrington Church	Dep	0757	1013	1143	1549	1816	1921	2151
Landcross Chapel		0807	1023	1153	1559	1826	1931	2201
Bideford Quay (Stop D)		0814	1030	1200	1606	1833	1938	2208
Instow The Quay		1039	1209	1615	1842	1947	2217	
Fremington New Inn		1047	1217	1623	1850	1954	2224	
Bickington Garage		1050	1220	1626	1853	1957	2227	
Roundswell, Gratton Way		0830						
Opp Barnstaple Railway Station		0836	1057	1227	1633	1900	2003	2233
Barnstaple Bus Station		0845	1103	1233	1639	1905	2008	2238

### SATURDAYS

Exeter Bus Station		0830	1000	1400	1630	1740	2015	
Exeter St Davids Station		0840	1010	1410	1640	1750	2023	
Duryard, Cowley Bridge		0846	1016	1416	1646	1756	2028	
Newton St Cyres, Crown and Sceptre		0853	1023	1423	1653	1803	2035	
Crediton Railway Station		0643	0859	1029	1429	1659	1809	2041
Crediton Lloyds Bank		0648	0904	1034	1434	1704	1814	2046
Copplestone Stone	Arr	0656	0912	1042	1442	1712	1822	2054
		8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Copplestone Stone	Dep	0656	0912	1042	1442	1712	1822	2054
Bow, Iter Park		0703	0919	1049	1449	1719	1829	2101
North Tawton, The Square		0713	0929	1059	1459	1729	1839	2111
Marchard Road, Devonshire Dumping								
Winkleigh Turn		0724	0940	1110	1510	1740	1850	2121
Dolton Barfield Road		0735	0951	1121	1521	1751	1901	2131
Beaford Bus Shelter		0744	1000	1130	1530	1800	1909	2139
Little Torrington, Rosemoor RHS Gardens		0750	1006	1136	1536	1806	1915	2145
Great Torrington Church	Arr	0756	1012	1142	1542	1812	1921	2151
		8	8	8	8	8	8	8
Great Torrington Church	Dep	0757	1013	1143	1543	1813	1921	2151
Landcross Chapel		0807	1023	1153	1553	1823	1931	2201
Bideford Quay (Stop D)		0814	1030	1200	1600	1830	1938	2208
Instow The Quay		1039	1209	1609	1839	1947	2217	
Fremington New Inn		1047	1217	1617	1847	1954	2224	
Bickington Garage		1050	1220	1620	1850	1957	2227	
Roundswell, Gratton Way		0830						
Opp Barnstaple Railway Station		0836	1055	1225	1625	1855	2001	2231
Barnstaple Bus Station		0845	1101	1231	1631	1901	2006	2236

<sup>a</sup> This bus continues as a through service with through tickets available and passengers can remain on the bus

**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

## Annex D

### Leaflet for Inaugural Meeting of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

## Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance



To secure a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple and upgrade of the North Devon (Tarka) Line between Exeter and Barnstaple, championing their transformational benefits for communities and businesses and advocating to decision-makers the economic, social and environmental case for developing and investing in the project.

Participants invited to inaugural event on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024 in Bideford, Torridge, Devon  
Sponsored by Bideford and Barnstaple Town Councils, Tarka Rail Association and Railfuture

Barnstaple Town Council - Mayor of Barnstaple – Cllr Louisa York  
Barnstaple Town Council - Town Clerk – Rob Ward  
Bideford Town Council - Mayor of Bideford – Cllr Jamie McKenzie  
Bideford Town Council - Town Clerk – Paul Swan

Devon County Council - Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport – Cllr Andrea Davis  
Devon County Council - Deputy Director for Planning – Jamie Hulland

Great Western Railway - Managing Director – Mark Hopwood CBE  
Great Western Railway - Business Development Portfolio Director – Tom Pierpoint  
Great Western Railway - Head of Strategic Service Development – Matt Barnes  
Great Western Railway - Regional Growth Manager (West) – David Whiteway

Harland & Wolff - General Manager, Appledore – Tom Hart

MP for Torridge & West Devon – Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC  
MP for North Devon – Selaine Saxby  
MP for Central Devon – Rt Hon Mel Stride  
MP for North Cornwall – Scott Mann

Network Rail - Western Route Director – Marcus Jones  
Network Rail - Western Route Business Manager – Victoria Storey  
Network Rail - Devon and Cornwall Director – Chris Fuoco  
Network Rail - Industry Programme Director – Bogdan Lupu  
Network Rail - Restoring Your Railway Programme Director – Mike Smith  
Northam Town Council - Mayor of Northam – Cllr Peter Hames  
Northam Town Council - Town Clerk – Jane Mills  
North Devon District Council - Chair of North Devon DC – Cllr Julie Hunt  
North Devon District Council - Leader of North Devon DC – Cllr Ian Roome  
North Devon District Council - Chief Exec – Ken Miles  
North Devon District Council - Head of Place Property & Regeneration – Sarah Jane Mackenzie-Shapland

Petroc College - Vice Principal Finance, Resources & Regional Affairs – Bill Blythe

Railfuture - Policy Director and Devon & Cornwall liaison – Ian Brown CBE  
Railfuture - Infrastructure & Networks Director – Roger Blake

South West Business Council - Tim Jones – Chairman  
South West Business Council - Paul Coles – Chief Executive; also newly-appointed Chair of Torridge Place Board

Tarka Rail Association - Chair – Mike Day  
Tarka Rail Association - co-Vice Chair and ACE Rail project campaign lead – Tim Steer  
Tarka Rail Association - co-Vice Chair – David Northey  
Tarka Rail Association - Vice-President – Peter West OBE  
Torridge District Council - Chair of Torridge DC – Cllr Doug Bushby  
Torridge District Council - Leader of Torridge DC – Cllr Ken James  
Torridge District Council - Chief Exec – Steve Hearse  
Torridge District Council - Head of Communities & Place – Sean Kearney

Lewis Clarke – South West region reporter, Reach

Paul Crockett - Managing Director, The Voice FM

**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

## **Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance**

**To secure a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple and upgrade of the North Devon (Tarka) Line between Exeter and Barnstaple, championing their transformational benefits for communities and businesses and advocating to decision-makers the economic, social and environmental case for developing and investing in the project.**

### **Inaugural event on Friday 1<sup>st</sup> March 2024 – in Bideford, Torridge, Devon.**

Minute of the **Bideford Town Council** Decarbonisation and Environment Committee meeting on 8 February 2022:

29. ACE RAILWAY – ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FUNDING SUPPORT

RECOMMENDED that: £3,000.00 is provided from the Climate Change budget to support the Environmental aspect of the Economic Report and the benefits to the decarbonisation of Bideford. (approved at Town Council meeting on 3 March 2022).

Minute of the **North Devon District Council** Strategy and Resources Committee on 4 April 2022:

127. Reinstatement of Bideford to Barnstaple Rail Link. RESOLVED that motion to support the re-instatement of Bideford to Barnstaple rail link for passenger and other services, as proposed by ACE Rail be supported and the Council agrees:

(a) That the inclusion of this policy aim within the revised joint local plan be referred to the Joint Planning Policy Committee for consideration;

(b) To work with partners and organisations to explore this idea and where necessary to lobby those who may contribute to making this happen including Great British Railways, Devon County Council, Peninsula Transport, and the Government.

Minute of the **Torridge District Council** meeting on 13 June 2022:

Minute 12a Written Notice of Motion. That TDC, following on from the presentation made at the last Full council meeting, do support the extension of the railway line from Barnstaple to Bideford and that this aspiration is embedded in the new Joint Local Plan. Extension of the railway line from Barnstaple to Bideford also be embedded in the Economic Development Business Plan.

Minute of the **Joint Planning Policy Committee of North Devon and Torridge District Councils** on 15 July 2022:

16. Reinstatement of Bideford to Barnstaple Rail Link. RESOLVED that the Bideford to Barnstaple rail link is considered as part of the People and Place project (the revised joint Local Plan).

Minute of the **Bideford Town Council** meeting on Thursday 7 December 2023:

98. NOTICE OF MOTION. That this Council joins the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance as a founding member. Bideford Town Council recognises the importance of multiple transport links to the rest of the country and aims to see Bideford reconnected to the national rail network for the benefit of the local economy and community as soon as practically possible.

This Council therefore Resolves (extract)

a. To join the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance as a founding member.

b. To call on other public bodies, voluntary and business stakeholders and others to take an active role in the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance.

c. Support ACE Rail 'Reconnection 2040' to see Bideford fully reconnected to the national rail network by 2040.

Minute of the **Torridge District Council** meeting on Monday 11 December 2023:

214. Draft Strategic Plan 2024-29. Under the 'Local Economy' theme, 'Actions by us and in partnership' now includes:

"Investigate with the relevant partner organisations (North Devon Council, DCC, ACE Rail and Network Rail) the appetite to jointly commission and fund a study to evaluate the economic and environmental benefits and impacts of re-establishing the rail link."

Draft Minute of the **Barnstaple Town Council** meeting on 22 January 2024:

107. The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance is promoting a rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple. This council believes that such a link contributes to a sustainable transport strategy for the northern Devon area.

This Council therefore RESOLVES (extract):

1) To join the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance as a founding Member

2) To call on other public bodies, voluntary and business stakeholders and others to support sustainable transport options for northern Devon and to take an active role in the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

3) To support an integrated sustainable transport strategy for northern Devon, including proposals to see Bideford fully reconnected to the national rail network, by 2040.

Draft Minute of the **Torridge District Council** meeting on 22 January 2024:

231. Shared Prosperity Fund investment plan 2024/25. Resolved: That the revised Shared Prosperity Fund investment plan priorities for 2024 – 2025 intervention themes for delivery be approved.

Economic Development Manager's report: Proposed increases / changes for 2024 / 2025 –

E31: Feasibility studies (3) including "Bideford railway study (to work alongside other key stakeholders)" - £105,000 revenue.

**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

## **Annex E**

### **Letters of Support Read Out at the Inaugural Meeting of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance**

#### **The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP, Torridge and West Devon**

Firstly, I'd like to thank all of you in this organisation. You are embarking on a very worthwhile cause. It is to my regret that existing diary commitments prohibit me from attending, as I otherwise would have done.

I support the reopening of rail communications to Torridge and West Devon wherever possible. Last year, I held an extremely informative and constructive meeting with GWR at the old Bideford Station who advised me the extension was at the top of their list of achievable projects in the South-West.

There is substantial support in Torridge for exploring the viability and economic case for this important railway connection to Barnstaple. Housing and population growth are likely to require improved communication links in the future. Such a link would no doubt require the upgrading of the line between Barnstaple and Exeter, and that too would have incalculable benefits for Torridge.

In West Devon, the Government has recently announced that it will "fund to delivery" the Tavistock to Bere Alston railway line. I wish to see a similar success in the Torridge part of this constituency.

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP, Torridge and West Devon

01.03.2024

#### **Selaine Saxby MP, North Devon**

My apologies for not being with you today, but I wholeheartedly support the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance's ambition to restore the rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple, and to upgrade the existing Tarka Line between Barnstaple and Exeter.

As many of you in the local area will have seen recently following the Cedars Roundabout traffic disruption, commuting via the roads in North Devon can sometimes be difficult and frustrating.

In the summer seasons especially, the roads around North Devon and Torridge can become gridlocked from an influx of tourists coming to enjoy our beautiful beaches and countryside. Whilst we welcome and appreciate tourists and the benefits they bring to our economy, our roads often bear the brunt with an uplift in traffic that can be difficult to manage for everyone.

Therefore, the proposal to re-establish the old railway line between Barnstaple and Bideford, although not necessarily a replica of the former route, would be a huge advantage for locals and tourists alike. Providing visitors with an ease of access between the two would both encourage more tourists to come here by train, reducing the number of cars on the roads and therefore making daily commutes less stressful and erratic for locals. Students and workers will also have increased opportunities to travel safely to additional learning or employment centres, allowing more people to get involved in projects for their own personal or professional development. Improved access and reduced road traffic will reflect positively on the economic prosperity of both Barnstaple, Bideford and the wider region.

Re-establishing this rail link will be the next natural progression on upgrading the Tarka Line, increasing the number of trains and carriages particularly for the early morning journeys. Exeter, our nearest City is never getting physically closer and serves as the gateway to the national rail network with easy links to places like Bath and London, and with its own renowned universities and research centres in the city centre. An upgraded line would therefore enable students and workers to commute daily or travel beyond with greater ease and efficiency. Equally important is the likely positive effect improved access will have on the local economy. It may even encourage young professionals into Barnstaple and the surrounding area, which could serve to alleviate some of the difficulties my constituents are facing from the lack of workforce in critical industries such as dentistry and social care. Indeed, a dental practice cited concerns from prospective employees about the lack of public transport infrastructure as a reason they could not recruit.

In that regard, enhancing and extending our rail network couldn't be a more important step in our ambition to level up North Devon and enhance the Taw and Torridge economic area. I therefore offer the Alliance my full support on their ambition.

Selaine Saxby MP, North Devon

01.03.2024

**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

**Andrea Davis, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport, Devon County Council**

My sincere apologies for not being with you today, previous diary commitments preclude me from being with you in person. I am however very much with you in spirit.

Devon County Council and Peninsula Transport are committed to decarbonising the transport system, improving connectivity and giving genuine transport choice for our residents, visitors and businesses.

In Devon we have a track record for re-opening rail links, opening stations and integrating transport modes. Improving connectivity for residents in Northern Devon, supporting new development with transport infrastructure and creating healthy, connected communities for the future is key to our future wellbeing and prosperity.

We thank you for the work done so far and look forward to working with you in the future.

Andrea Davis, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport, Devon County Council  
01.03.2024

**EXETER TO BARNSTAPLE RAIL ROUTE MODERNISATION**  
**PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE**

## **Annex F**

### **Management Arrangements for the Tavistock Line Reopening**

- “The Project Board, acting as the Senior Stakeholder Forum, meeting on a regular basis will provide strategic direction and oversight in the development of the project. Key roles and responsibilities of the Project Board are listed below:
  - Champion the [Barnstaple line modernisation] ~~Tavistock Line reopening~~ scheme, its delivery and reporting to respective corporate management teams and elected members to ensure corporate support and buy-in;
  - Facilitate and promote joined up delivery and to engage with and secure support at a strategic level from key stakeholders and partners;
  - Endorse the overall direction of the project whilst working within the framework of Restoring your Railway principles;
  - Provide a point of escalation for the Steering Group should this be needed for matters outside the railway boundary;
  - Make decisions/recommendations on strategic issues and resolve showstoppers; and
  - Provide ‘upwards’ high-level liaison with Government bodies.
- The Steering Group will be the forum where formal decisions are made, providing promoter/cross industry leadership and oversight for the development and delivery of the reopening of the [Barnstaple line modernisation scheme] ~~Tavistock to Plymouth Line~~. The Steering Group will implement the Project Plan and focus on the day-to-day project management of the continuing development of the PACE objectives and drive forward the project. The Steering Group will identify and oversee the project working groups. To do so effectively is likely to require regular meetings to generate and maintain momentum in the project. The Steering Group will report to the Project Board (Senior Stakeholder Forum). Key roles and responsibilities are listed below:
  - Oversee the project development (including the work undertaken by either consultants or contractors) up to the end of PACE 2 and the enabling elements of PACE 3. This work will include areas of project development such as resourcing, programme and budget;
  - Review and monitor the project progress against the milestones agreed with DfT;
  - Review and monitor project cost against forecast and authorise change control in line with proposed change control process;
  - Review and monitor the land strategy plan and progress to programme;
  - Provide a forum for discussion of any material input from any of the stakeholders, for example related to land use planning, transportation, rail industry standards, etc;
  - Review and monitor risk and opportunities and detail where support may be needed to support scheme progress;
  - Provide co-ordination of input from partner organisations and draw in technical expertise as required.

The Project will be delivered in partnership between Devon County Council, Network Rail and GWR. In line with similar schemes in Devon, the project will adopt a ‘one team’ approach for delivery. It is anticipated that Devon County Council will be the main scheme promoters up to the end of PACE 1 (previously GRIP3). At this point, the Decision to Design<sup>213</sup>, it is assumed that Network Rail will take over the scheme as main Project Sponsor, with support from Devon County Council on the highways and cycle infrastructure delivery, and GWR on the station operation and rail service arrangements.”

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<sup>213</sup> In the business case stages described in this document, effectively at Outline Business Case stage.