Representing the users of the Barnstaple to Exeter railway line

Response to the Devon County Council Local Transport Plan December 2010

Foreword

As one of the longest established User Groups, we very much welcome the fact that we are being consulted on Devon County Council's Local Transport Plan and have been pleased to participate in the process.

As will be seen, our response has been prepared following a great deal of thought and research as well as internal consultation within our Association. I should like to thank Alan Clark for all his hard work in assembling the document on our behalf.

John Burch

Chairman
December 2010

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Tarka Rail Association

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1. About the Association

The Tarka Rail Association is a voluntary organisation representing the interests of passengers and other interested parties who use or benefit from the rail services provided by the 39 mile North Devon line which links Exeter and the main line network with Crediton, Eggesford and Barnstaple as well as the rural communities between. It is a long established and highly respected organisation which has always worked closely with rail operators, Network Rail and local authorities. It has recently achieved, with co-operation and support from Devon County Council and First Great Western, amongst other improvements, a mostly hourly daily service which continues to result in excellent passenger growth despite the economic downturn.

The Tarka Rail Association's aspirations for the line are to promote the line by encouraging its use both as a means to travel regularly for business, work, education or leisure within the Exeter to Barnstaple area but also to places anywhere on the rail network both in the United Kingdom and Europe. With the need to reduce car travel, it is required to become a viable alternative and in order to achieve this, daily earlier and later trains will be required. There is also a reasonable percentage of through journeys between the North Devon line and the Avocet line to Exmouth, as it is the quickest and most convenient means of crossing Exeter. This is a vital link for the communities of North, Mid and East Devon. The line needs to continue to deliver the current marketing mix of social and commercial objectives. We share Devon County Council's aspiration to reduce traffic congestion by increased use of public transport.

The Tarka Line is a designated Community Railway which has resulted in local participation in suggestions for service provision and we feel that this has contributed to increased passenger numbers as it has responded to changing market demands.

2. Passenger's Aspirations of what a rail service and associated Public Transport should deliver

The Tarka Rail line is used for a variety of travel journeys ranging from the daily commute to South West destinations by workers or college students and leisure or business trips. These will frequently involve making a connecting journey at Exeter St David's and so the service provided on the line has to offer realistic connection times or through trains in order to provide a viable choice as a means of transport. For some users there is no other choice than rail as they either cannot drive due to age, poor health or through choice such as environmental considerations. Others cannot afford to run a car. As the cost of motoring is predicted to increase with the increasing world demand for oil, other transport alternatives have to be encouraged. Some experience a long journey either by car or public transport before they arrive at the station due to

the sparse rail network existing in the area of Devon served by the Tarka Line.

Passengers have welcomed the results of our aspirations being met of improved services on the line which would not have been possible without the cooperation of the current franchise holder, Network Rail and the support of Devon County Council. This has seen a significant growth in passenger numbers, as has the extra earlier Sunday morning train which commenced running with the May 2010 timetable, which has met with an extremely positive response with high passenger usage. This train is to be continued in the December 2010 along with the introduction of a late evening train on Fridays. These changes would not have happened without both the local authority and the franchise holder listening to what we feel the passengers require and responding accordingly.

Travel patterns change with time and what at one time appeared an adequate Sunday timetable had become outdated with the advent of increased Sunday shop opening and the need of the public and workers to respond to this. Also, as the area is a tourist area, there are a larger number of journeys made as weekend breaks throughout the year, with the necessity to return home on Sunday.

Passengers expect a safe station environment with adequate signage to inform them of the various transport options available and a map to direct them to places of interest or aids to their final destination. Live departure times for buses or printed timetables should be available to aid them on their journey. An integrated public transport structure should be the aim with minimal but realistic connection times between rail, bus or ferry transport. Adequate shelter from inclement weather should also be provided. Thanks to Devon County Council, major strides have been made towards achieving these aims.

There should be adequate secure car spaces at each station and suitable transport integration to allow journeys to continue to or from the station where demand dictates. There should be local Station Travel Plans either provided by the train operator or local authority.

3 General Response to Local Transport Plan Proposals

The plan is available at:
http://devoncc.limehouse.co.uk/portal/devon_and_torbay_local_transport_plan/ltp3_draftdocuments?pointId=1548575

The five goals of the plan are clear. Encouraging less use of car transport is welcomed and the transport needs of all in the community are assessed.

The place strategy raises some concerns with regard to centres of population.
Although the plan appears to centre on Exeter (population approximately 118,000) and Torbay (population 134,000) and their economic and urban importance it has to be realised that although the geographical area is perceived as being more rural the combined population of Barnstaple and Bideford is 85,000 and if Ilfracombe and South Molton are also included this grows to a total of 118,300. It is included in the section with smaller market towns e.g. Crediton. Please see table 1 below for details.

Barnstaple is the economic and employment centre of the area and the hub for transport routes. It is a key tourist destination and its popularity is growing. It is estimated that tourism generates over £410 million of expenditure in North Devon and Torridge every year supporting over 11,500 jobs. It has one 39 mile single track rail line linking it to the rest of the rail network, the North Devon Link Road which is single carriageway, with a poor safety record, and links to the M5 and the A377 to Exeter.

The transport plan identifies that Devon will experience some extreme weather events but does not identify it's concerns for asset protection of the coastal rail route in South Devon which could effectively cut off rail travel west of Exeter or the links east of Devon across the Somerset Levels unless an alternative becomes available. Although not responsible for the infrastructure, the Council's plan should acknowledge this threat.

The growth of rail travel and the benefits this brings to easing road congestion, public health and the environment this brings should be strongly acknowledged. Devon enjoys a rail network marketed under the Devon Metro name which provides a popular frequent ½ hourly daytime service to Torbay and Exmouth and an hourly daytime service to Barnstaple with the network centred on Exeter. This asset relieves city centre congestion and its associated atmospheric pollution. With projections that by 2026 over half the population will be over 65 then there will be a greater dependency for this age group to use public transport as many will not be in a position to drive a car. The Association welcomes the plan's appreciation of the health benefits of walking and cycling. Use of public transport also involves a degree of walking or cycling usually in order to join the system. The encouragement of employers to formulate a travel to work strategy and the benefits this will bring in relieving congestion, benefiting the environment and public health are to be welcomed. It should also boost the economy.

Overcrowding on trains particularly Cross Country and local trains is a concern and we are pleased that the report mentions the current shortage and quality of some rolling stock. The report is also to be commended on the awareness of high cost of some rail fares which must deter some people from travelling by this means. The hopes of cascading of rolling stock by electrification of the Great western route out of London are also mentioned and the Association also recognise this as a possible solution to part of the problem. The Association is in agreement with the proposed new stations on the outskirts of Exeter (Newcourt and Marsh Barton) as this again eases congestion on two growing areas of this city. Rail operator's performance should be monitored and quality of rolling stock is part of this process.

Tourism should encourage use of multimodal transport as congestion is regularly caused during peak tourism transport movements.

The North Devon line service is currently running at certain times of the day at peak infrastructure capacity. This should be mentioned as this is a concern of the Association as it will inhibit our aspirations of a more frequent service in the future as demand increases for higher number of train journeys. .

Table 1 Population [2]

Town/City	Approximate current population	Increase over last 10 years (1999-2009)%
Barnstaple	47,800	8.69
Bideford	38,000	10.54
Crediton	20,400	7.79
Exeter	140,800	9.46
Great Torrington	12,300	9.88
Ilfracombe	19,000	6.66
Okehampton	26,100	17.27
South Molton	13,500	10.19

4. Detailed response to Local Transport Plan

The Association would like to see in Paragraph 1.2.1 the box concerning rail patronage to read:
"Rail patronage has increased and particularly on local services which have seen a **dramatic increase in passenger numbers**".
"Dualling of the track at Axminster has enabled an **hourly service to London** via Salisbury"

In Paragraph 1.4.5 Reference is made here (and many places elsewhere in the document) to **"The Transport Network"**, and also to the asset base etc. Although owned by Network Rail, the rail network is a key and important part of the transport network in Devon. Consequently, throughout the document, it should be made clear whether reference is indeed being made to the **transport network** or the **highway network** or **the rail transport network** as appropriate. In this context and in relation to this Paragraph, with regard to extreme weather events the Sea Wall around Dawlish is very important, and its condition, maintenance and an alternative route all need to be taken into account in the document.

Paragraph 1.4.8 is good and it is suggested that people need to be encouraged to think of "transport" and use the appropriate mode for any particular journey. Seeing car transport as the only option should be discouraged when other options are available.

Paragraph 1.4.17: this is where voluntary groups can play a part, e.g. the Tarka Line Walks Brochure produced by the TRA. Funding for publications and initiatives such as guided and self guided walks from stations would be very cost effective and local groups such as us can input invaluable local knowledge at minimal cost.

Paragraph 1.4.19: this point is important as there have been cases in the United Kingdom where housing developments have been built where roads have been designed in a layout unsuitable for bus access.

Paragraph 1.4.21: access to rail services for some passengers particularly elderly, disabled

and those with young children is hindered due to low platforms at Exton, Newton St Cyres and Copplestone stations. Pedestrian access to Lapford station and Portsmouth Arms for example is hazardous due to lack of suitable footpaths.

Question 1: Yes they are clear and, subject to the above we agree.

Paragraph 1.6: Availability of finance is another vital factor.

Paragraph 1.7: Network Rail has a large asset base, including bridges, stations and level crossings.

Paragraph 1.8.3: Strongly support this

Paragraph 1.8.4: The importance of Barnstaple and surrounding towns needs to be recognized. Please see comments in section 3 regarding this.

Question 2: The Association strongly agrees with the approach based on places.

Paragraph 1.9.5: Foundation – should also include e.g. station enhancements as part of the network as this encourages the use of public transport and an improved public perception. Station enhancements can encourage a wider use of public transport e.g. addition of passenger lifts and improve revenue protection and travel information.

Question 3: They are clear but see above comment.

Paragraph 2.2.3: Add railway lines and stations as these also are major contributors to the transport network.

Paragraphs 2.3.8 & 2.4.3: We firmly believe that as shop windows, bus shelters should be maintained to a high standard and support the idea of employing commercial shelter providers as in Exeter and Torbay. The shelter in Copplestone, for example, is frankly disgusting! Shelters should offer protection from weather and passengers should feel secure in them whilst waiting for the bus. They should also have sufficient travel information which is up to date. Information on available local facilities would be useful with a map of the routes serving the stop. We agree that the bus station in Exeter is in need of improvement and can be intimidating at night.

2.3.9: (additional Paragraph and heading Rail) to briefly outline where rail capacity enhancement is necessary, especially bearing in mind the very long lead planning and construction times. Examples include a new station & passing loop at Copplestone & passing loop at Umberleigh on the Tarka Line to improve capacity and enable a two trains per hour service to run. The proposed new station at Copplestone would have a large car park and act as a Parkway station for Mid Devon. No doubt the Council would want to list other improvements on the Axminster and Exmouth lines.

There is no report back on rail consultation – TRA and others made submissions.

Paragraph 2.5.3: We assume this includes the rail network – if not it should refer only to the highway network. We agree with the policy however.

Paragraph 2.6: This should read "Maintain the strategic highway network to provide an efficient and reliable road transport network."

Additional Paragraph 2.7.3 "Climatic change is having a greater impact on the condition of the rail network and associated structures because of the increase in extreme weather events including; intensive rainfall, colder winters and warmer summers. This can cause landslides in cuttings and collapse of embankments e.g. Honiton to Axminster. A lot of rail infrastructure was built before there was a greater understanding of soil mechanics. Also some rail routes run by the estuaries and coast e.g. Dawlish and are prone to flooding.

Paragraph 2.9.4: We support

2.9.5: (additional Paragraph) to expand on 2.3.9 but also to refer to continuing the enhancement of stations to improve their environment and security for passengers and travel information. Where there will be continued operation of level crossings then road and rail safety should be paramount and efforts made to improve line speed without sacrificing safety. .

Question 4: No – see our comments above

Paragraph 2.10.1: Should refer to strategic highway network

At end of Paragraph please add to include railway stations enhancements to benefit and encourage wider public use.

Paragraph 2.10.2: Should refer to reliable highway network and also add at end extra Paragraph to mention contributions to railway station enhancements to increase and encourage rail use.

Questions 5 & 6 : Yes subject to inclusion of the above

Paragraph 3.4.1: More recent data is available (data in report refers to 2007) and First Great Western, South West Trains and Cross Country will be able to assist

Paragraph 3.4.2 We agree that this is a problem and is particularly bad between Taunton and Bristol, Birmingham and Leeds.

Paragraph 3.4.3: This route also provides journey links through connections to the south coast particularly the area from Bournemouth to Brighton as well as south London and the southern Home Counties and Gatwick Airport.

Paragraph 3.4.5: This is changing as logistic companies examine the most cost effective means of moving goods. Supermarkets have entered the rail freight market as have companies such as Eddie Stobbards so we must ensure that facilities are protected.

Paragraph 3.7.5: Electrification could have very beneficial effects in creating more capacity to and from the West Country as journey times would be improved and rolling stock

cascaded.

Paragraph 3.7.6: Agree with the high cost of some peak time business rail fares. We disagree that all rail stock is poor quality as High Speed Train carriages and Class 159s on the Waterloo line are good, but there is scope for improvement.

Paragraph 3.9.3: The rail network can be an alternative at time of bad weather as, e.g. for a time the Tarka Line was the only link to North Devon open in the snows of February 2010.

Paragraph 3.9.5: Please add "as well as many other local services within Devon".

Paragraph 3.9.9: Buses used on the Exeter Airport route should be given their own distinctive livery branding as occurs elsewhere within the country.

Paragraph 3.10.1: Please clarify – transport or highway or even road transport – what type is being referred to?

Paragraph 3.11.7: Investment in the Tarka Line infrastructure and possible longer term expansion of the rail network in North Devon could be an option in solving this situation.

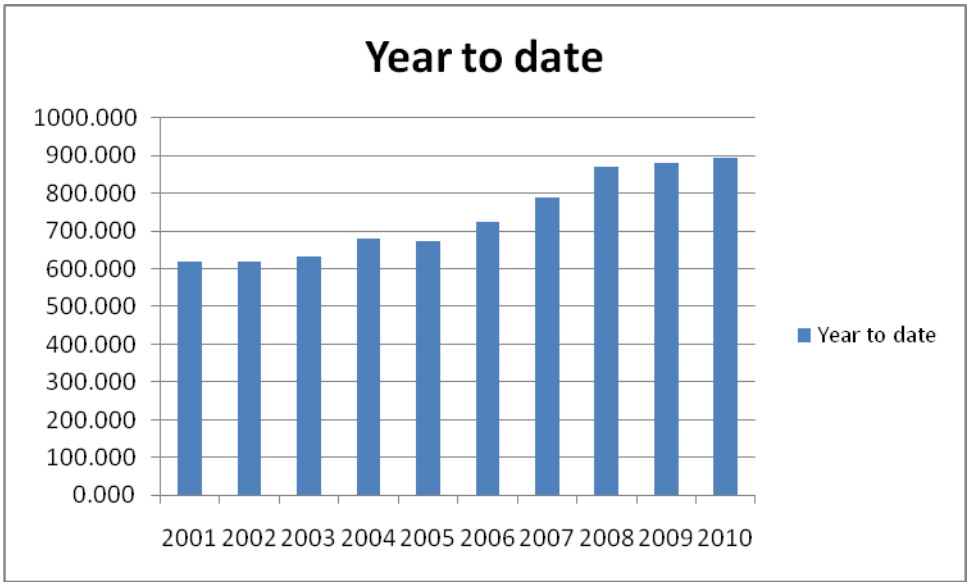
Question 7: See above

Paragraph 3.13.2: Replace "improvements to rolling stock" with "additional rolling stock" as most long distance stock is not too bad and this will alleviate overcrowding quicker and more cost effectively.

Question 8: Yes subject to the above

Paragraph 4.2.4: There have been dramatic increases in passenger use at both of Exeter's main railway stations and Digby and Sowton is the most used unmanned railway station in Devon with a footfall for 2008-9 of 275,978[3]. Station footfall is currently over 2.9million at Exeter St David's and over 1.5million at Exeter Central.

Figure 1 Passenger numbers on the Exeter to Exmouth Line from 4th January 2001 until 17th October 2010.[4]



Paragraph 4.3.4: the recently announced new rolling stock plan may help here by allowing cascades of older stock and should be reflected in the plan. Pleased to see that there is wide spread support for Devon Metro but there should be mention of plans for bus/rail interchange or bus/rail co-ordination. The lines to Torbay, Exmouth and Barnstaple are all enjoying a renaissance and are busier than ever. Consequently, they function as important secondary lines rather than mere branch lines.

Paragraph 4.5.6: The Tarka Line is also very important here and suffers from overcrowding at peak times during the week and on Saturdays so would benefit from more frequent and longer trains. Improvements to the rail infrastructure and a more frequent service would be a longer term requirement.

Paragraph 4.7.2: There is no mention of any source of funding for the additional infrastructure (e.g. passing loops) to accommodate these new stations.

Paragraph 4.7.4: This Paragraph requires rewriting as the middle part makes very little sense. Why the reference to only cars and vans?

Paragraph 4.8.2: The Association warmly accepts the idea of employer travel plans and would like to encourage their wider use and promotion.

Question 10: Only provided sufficient recognition of rail's contribution is acknowledged! We agree that Exeter is the transport Gateway and its importance is recognized.

Paragraph 4.10: The Devon Metro should be specified and plans for its expansion towards Honiton and Axminster recognized.

Paragraph 4.11.1: Secure central points for cycle storage should be planned to enable integration with other forms of transport. Local fares are reasonable, especially with the ability to purchase cheaper tickets. Therefore capacity is more important than cost.

Paragraph 4.11.2: Under deliver major developments the need for rail infrastructure enhancements e.g. longer trains & associated platform works, with in the longer term more capacity needs to be promoted.

Question 11: Mostly subject to the above

Paragraph 5.6.26: The Association agrees with the plans for a new railway station at Edginswell to serve north Torquay.

Paragraph 5.8.2: The Association agrees with the plans for upgrading bus and rail interchanges and stations in Torbay.

Questions 14 & 15: No

Question 16: We are in favour of the vision.

Paragraph 6.4.1: Devon County Council should be proud of the support and investment given to enhancing stations and services such as the Tarka Line and these must be mentioned as these have helped increase the number using them.

Paragraph 6.7: We strongly agree with this vision.

Paragraph 6.7.1 & .2: We fully support this. Alternative transport to the car should be made easily accessible and available to make it attractive.

Paragraph 6.9.1: Information should be readily available at popular tourist locations e.g. Tourist Information Centres, hotels, camp sites and tourism promotion websites to inform potential and committed visitors to the range of alternative travel services and tickets available. Ticket options e.g. on the Tarka Line the validity of Cheap Day Returns, Groupsave, Ranger tickets, Season Tickets, Carnets, integrated transport tickets and bus explorer tickets. Some tourist attractions offer deals with travel tickets. Emphasis needs to be placed on the flexibility of some tickets to enable journey breaks.

Paragraph 6.9.6: Need to acknowledge the work of Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership as well as Rail User Groups (such as Tarka Rail Association walks publication and Avocet's bird watching initiatives).

Question 17: Broadly subject to the above

Paragraph 6.12.1: Transport should be a major factor in planning decisions for new industrial, retail and housing locations.
As there is no other opportunity, use this as a means of connecting towns to the coast and countryside for recreation for local residents and tourists alike.

We would also like it made clear that support for community involvement would also include for leisure initiatives such as the Tarka Rail Association's walks brochure and planned cycling brochure. The Association is also working on a plan to encourage Sunday Bike Trains.

Question 18: Broadly in favour of this.

5. References

1. http://www.northdevonplus.com/tourismmembership.asp
2. http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/councildemocracy/neighbourhoods-villages/market-town-focus.htm
3. http://www.rail-reg.gov.uk/server/show/nav.1529
4. Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership Wessex trains and First Great Western

6. Appendix

Projected passenger figures for the Tarka line from 2009[4]

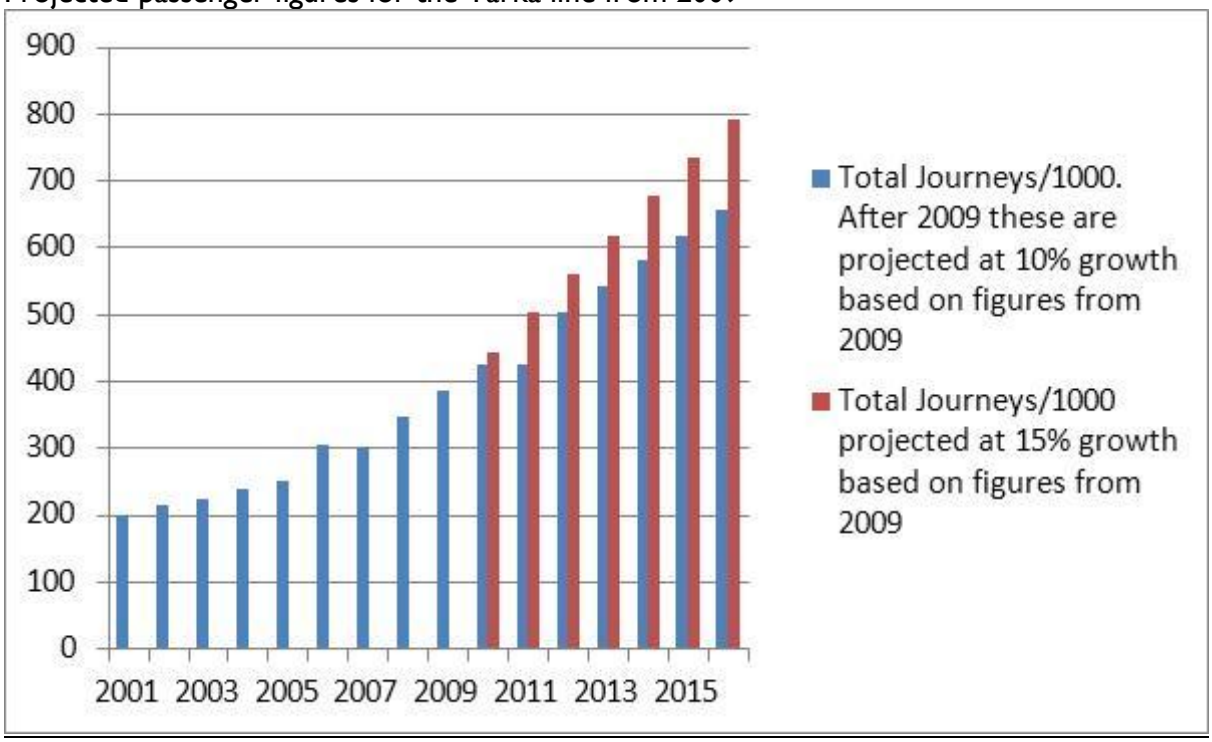


Figure1: Predicted passenger growth on the Tarka Line
Journey figures provided by Wessex Trains and First Great Western 2001-2009