



**AVOCET LINE  
RAIL USERS GROUP**

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**Greater Western Franchise Replacement Consultation**

I am responding on behalf of the Avocet Line Rail Users Group (ALRUG), which represents users of the Exeter to Exmouth railway line.

ALRUG was formed in 2007, has over 200 members and an active committee of volunteers. The Group's work includes monitoring service levels, performance and usage of the line (we conduct regular passenger counts in collaboration with the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership) and maintaining a comprehensive information base of operating data.

ALRUG enjoys close working relationships with the current train operator (First Great Western), Devon County Council, Exeter City Council, the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, and neighbouring user groups. The organisation is respected for its professional approach, and makes a significant contribution to current discussions on long-term service and infrastructure enhancements.

In preparing our response, ALRUG officers have had discussions with Devon County and Exeter City Council officials, and both local MPs - Hugo Swire (East Devon) and Ben Bradshaw (Exeter). ALRUG officers have also been involved in Travelwatch SouthWest's Stakeholder Meetings.

ALRUG's Committee has canvassed the views of the whole membership and the local community, through its own website and newsletter, through the press and ALRUG notice boards at stations on the line. The final draft of our response was discussed at a public meeting at Exmouth on 13<sup>th</sup> February.

Where our response does not address particular questions in the consultation document it is because we do not consider them to be directly relevant to the Avocet line.

Tony Day  
Chairman  
13<sup>th</sup> February 2012.

**Attachments:**

- Relevant consultation questions and answers*
- Appendix 1: Devon Metro – a summary*
- Appendix 2: the case for more trains on Sundays*

## Consultation questions

**1.** Respondents are encouraged to consider whether the proposed franchise objectives are an appropriate expression of the priorities that should apply to the new franchise.

We support the proposed franchise objectives, but would like to see a further objective included – to maximise the wider economic benefits which improved rail connectivity would bring throughout the franchise area, and in particular to the South West.

**2.** Respondents are encouraged to consider any specific local factors that they believe might influence the future level of passenger demand and to comment on any specific HLOS recommendations that they believe the franchisee should be required to implement.

Please see attached paper on the proposals for the Devon Metro scheme, which indicates that additional growth in employment and housing close to the Exeter to Exmouth line will result in significant new demand for rail travel. While there is as yet no timescale, the phased introduction of these proposals will span the length of the new franchise.

**4.** Respondents are encouraged to consider any specific local factors that they believe might influence the future level of passenger demand and to comment on any specific RUS recommendations that they believe the franchisee should be required to implement.

In common with other local stakeholders, we were very unhappy with the low growth forecasts upon which the Greater Western Route Utilisation Study was based. These ignored recent growth in passenger numbers, which there is every indication will be sustained and could increase. On top of this 'organic growth', planned housing and employment developments alongside the Exeter to Exmouth line includes provision for new stations, with associated considerable further new usage: see the Devon Metro summary.

**5.** Respondents are encouraged to consider investment priorities for the franchise and are asked to highlight interfaces with any other schemes that are likely to be delivered during the life of the next franchise. We also welcome proposals for alternative approaches to enable the proposed investment programme to be achieved at a reduced cost.

See the Devon Metro summary. We would ask that the Department considers these proposals as part of the preparation of the next HLOS document.

**6.** Respondents are encouraged to consider any changes to the services included in the Great Western franchise that they would like to propose as part of a remapping exercise.

The Devon Metro proposals include frequent services to the new town of Cranbrook. There is a good case for the new Great Western franchisee to operate all Exeter's local (i.e. Devon Metro) services even though Cranbrook is on a line which is currently part of the South West Trains franchise.

**8.** Respondents are encouraged to consider:

(a) Which responsibilities and types of services on the Great Western franchise might be suitable for more local decision-making?

(b) Which options for devolving decision-making should be considered further and which should be rejected?

(c) To which bodies might decision-making be devolved and how would governance, accountability and transparency be demonstrated, especially if consortia of sub-national bodies are formed?

(d) How might risk be dealt with if responsibilities are devolved?



The present train operator, First Great Western (FGW), has worked in partnership with key stakeholders Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership and passenger transport authorities (Devon County Council, also Cornwall County Council) to develop local rail services. FGW have also provided regular opportunities for a wider group of stakeholders, including rail user groups, to have their views heard – examples include an annual Community Rail conference, twice yearly meetings to review timetable aspirations, other stakeholder meetings and attendance at rail user group meetings.

Such wide local participation in decision making has enabled the train operator to be responsive to local demand. The result has been the provision of better timed or additional rail services which together have stimulated a growth in rail usage in the region that is well above that experienced in other parts of the country. The Avocet Line has been a beneficiary of this.

From the rail user's point of view this is a successful model for devolving decision making about local services and one which we would wish to see formalised in the next franchise. This could be achieved by a Local Management Unit with responsibility for regular consultation with local stakeholders.

Whilst we look forward to participating in the current Government consultation on devolving responsibility for rail services, we have some initial reservations about the prospect of local political control. We must also emphasise the need for any devolvement of responsibility to be accompanied by sufficient funding for subsidised services to continue to be subsidised so that local authorities bear no additional burden.

There is a case for the devolution of development of a project such as Devon Metro to a Project Board, perhaps led in this instance by the County Council, which would include the train operator and Network Rail, with the authority to specify the use of appropriate existing and development resources.

**9. Respondents are encouraged to bring to our attention research, evidence or publications which the Department should consider as part of this refranchising process.**

See the Devon Metro summary: the detailed work on which this is based has been done by Devon County Council and will doubtless be referred to in their response.

**10. The final specification will seek to avoid a prescriptive approach and to balance passenger, taxpayer and stakeholder interests. Respondents are encouraged to consider which aspects of the specification they believe should be mandated and which could be left to greater commercial discretion.**

We welcome Government's commitment to base the new franchise on the current level of service. To sustain this we consider it necessary to mandate first and last train times and the minimum frequency of services per hour at different times of day (on the Exeter to Exmouth line thus would mean a minimum of two trains per hour from the start of the morning peak to the end of the evening peak, with one train per hour during the evening).

We believe that demand has been demonstrated locally for a "seven day railway" and that weekend services (including Sundays) should also be based on a frequency of two trains per hour during the day –see attached paper on Sunday services.

Calling patterns, capacity, journey times and adjustments to the timetable should be left to commercial discretion but we would expect the train operator to consult with local interests (as currently happens).

To allow the train operator commercial freedom to respond to changing patterns of demand, mandated aspects of the specification could be reviewed at five yearly intervals.



The train operator should be free to make a commercial investment in services which exceed the mandated minimum level, or for increases in service to be funded through third parties. During the lifetime of this franchise we expect growth in demand that would justify investment in a fifteen minute interval service on the Exmouth line, at least as far as Topsham (attached Devon Metro summary refers).

**19.** *Should branch line services continue to call at all branch line stations, or could the needs of most passengers be better met by omission of some of the intermediate stops on some or all of the trains, so that the final destination is reached more quickly?*

We believe that decisions on matters such as this should be for the train operator to decide on a line by line basis, in consultation with local stakeholders: the imperatives for stopping patterns on the Exmouth line are quite different from those on e.g. the line to Barnstaple.

**21.** *Taking into account the current service pattern and the future changes, respondents are encouraged to suggest train service changes that they believe will be affordable, deliver value for money and provide a strong commercial, social or economic case.*

See the Devon Metro summary. In addition to these longer term proposals, there is a strong case for an immediate increase in Sunday services between Exeter and Exmouth, so that they are provided at a half hourly interval, as is the case the rest of the week. See Appendix 2

**23.** *Respondents are encouraged to consider:*

*(a) the steps which bidders should be expected to take to meet passenger demand and the most appropriate mechanisms for ensuring additional capacity is provided when it becomes necessary; and*

*(b) how capacity should be measured and appropriate targets set.*

(a) Despite every available coach having been pressed into service, there remains a national shortage of diesel multiple units which manifests in overcrowding on local services in the South West, including peak trains on the Avocet Line. This shortage of diesel units will continue to be a serious concern throughout most of the franchise. The planned cascade of existing units released by electrification will be offset by the withdrawal of several classes in 2020 as it will not be cost-effective to modify them to meet TSI/PRM accessibility requirements (this includes class 143 on which Avocet Line services depend heavily). Moreover all the units likely to be used in the Greater Western area will be life expired by the end of the franchise period. We therefore need to see the franchise:

- acknowledge that a new build of diesel multiple units will be required within the franchise period;
- place an expectation on the franchisee that (given the proposed length of franchise) they will invest in new rolling stock to meet existing demand and planned growth, sharing the risk with government or others as appropriate.

(b) Capacity measurement on the Exeter-Exmouth line is still hampered by a significant amount of ticketless travel, much of it through lack of opportunity to purchase tickets (despite recent improvement following revenue protection measures). This is caused by a lack of ticket machines at unstaffed stations, and journey times too short to collect all fares on trains. We hope the accuracy of capacity measurements will be improved by the proposed rail passenger counts database. Targets should be formally reviewed after 5 and 10 years of the franchise to ensure they accurately reflect capacity at that time.



*26. Respondents are encouraged to consider the best method for funding major station enhancements and are encouraged to consider any local accessibility issues that they believe need addressing.*

We agree that greater responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of stations should be passed from Network Rail to the franchisee and that such responsibility should cover station buildings in their entirety (where appropriate working in partnership with other bodies).

Passenger journeys on the line have increased by 61.6% since 2001 and 10.7% in 2011. As a consequence two stations in particular – Exmouth and Digby & Sowton – no longer meet the standard set out in the 2009 Better Rail Stations Review.

Exmouth station was rebuilt in 1976 to make way for a road scheme. The station was reduced considerably in size, which was a reflection of usage at that time. Footfall has now increased to 722,922 (2009/10 figures) resulting in congestion in the cramped station foyer, queues at the single ticket window (despite the presence of two ticket vending machines and a second sales point at the gate line) and a lack of facilities for passengers. The size of the building offers little prospect of improvement other than rebuilding, but town regeneration opportunities are expected to arise during the franchise term which should help to fund a new Exmouth station.

In the Better Rail Stations Review Exmouth was classified as category D, but its current footfall warrants reclassification as category C, the suggested standards for which warrant improvements that include

- ◆ toilets
- ◆ longer staffed hours
- ◆ longer ticket office hours
- ◆ more car park and cycle park spaces.

Digby & Sowton station was opened in 1995 to serve Sowton Business Park and a large new retail outlet at Digby. Since then extensive new housing has been developed adjacent to the station and employment opportunities at the business park have also increased. This has resulted in footfall at the station growing by 105% in the four years to 2009. At 271,316 this is now the busiest unstaffed station in the South West region. The station also serves the nearby Exeter Chiefs' ground at Sandy Park, where there are proposals to double the ground capacity.

The narrow station platform is heavily crowded during peak hours and on match days. Although the station shelter has recently been increased in size it still falls far short of requirements. Queues develop at the single ticket vending machine. There are no toilets or other facilities for passengers.

In the Better Stations Review of 2009 Digby & Sowton was classified as category F but it has a footfall which warrants a staffed station in category D. To meet the standards set out for a station in this category would require improvements that include

- ◆ staffing
- ◆ improvements to currently unused staff accommodation
- ◆ toilets
- ◆ vending machines



- ◆ wheelchair boarding ramps
- ◆ additional cycle and car parking.

There are no obvious funding streams to achieve this.

Platform lengths - four coach trains frequently run on the line in order to cope with passenger numbers and this is expected to become the norm. The Exmouth bound platform at St James Park is too short for a four coach train, which results in passenger confusion and inconvenience as well as operational difficulty and lost time. It should be lengthened.

Disability access - there are serious issues at Polsloe Bridge and St James Park which it would be expensive to resolve.

**27. Respondents are encouraged to consider which merit consideration for future improvement under these schemes and how such schemes could be funded.**

We welcome the inclusion of Exton for the much needed improvement which will be achieved by the proposed easier access hump.

**29. Respondents are encouraged to consider how ticket purchase could be made easier and how to minimise revenue loss across the franchise.**

The immediate requirement is for full Ticket Vending Machines at Lypstone Village and on the down platform at Topsham to reduce un-ticketed journeys. If the line is designated with Community Rail status (as currently proposed), it will be possible to develop local initiatives for making ticket purchase easier. In the longer term, the Devon Metro proposals envisage the introduction of some form of smart ticketing.

**33. Respondents are encouraged to consider local accessibility and mobility issues and suggest how improvements could be made.**

These and other improvements to stations, plus monitoring and reporting on service issues, can be assisted by accessing the views of legitimate rail user groups. We would accept that such groups should themselves be subject to some sort of minimum standard in order to be taken seriously; this might include level of membership, frequency of meetings, or methods of obtaining the views of members and passengers.



## DEVON METRO – A SUMMARY

### Introduction

1. Devon Metro is a scheme for the integration and enhancement of rail services in the Exeter travel to work area, now being progressed by Devon County Council (DCC). This paper is a summary of the scheme, produced by the Avocet Line Rail Users Group (ALRUG). Although the views expressed are those of ALRUG, it has been prepared after extensive consultation with DCC, Exeter City Council (ECC) and First Great Western, the incumbent Train Operating Company.

### The Case for Devon Metro

2. Exeter occupies a vital strategic position as the gateway to the South West peninsula: all major routes pass through it. The city has a vibrant and expanding economy. Over the last ten years it has been the seventh largest in the UK for job creation. Exeter University, itself the 25<sup>th</sup> fastest growing business in the UK, is consolidating its position as a major research centre and centre of excellence. The successful relocation of the Met Office in 2004 has attracted many other technology businesses. Exeter is a major retail centre, and the imminent arrival of John Lewis is a further indicator of confidence in the city's long term economic prospects.

3. The Exeter and East Devon Growth Point, a government supported initiative for the expansion of the city, will involve the building of over 25,000 houses in the next 15 years and the creation of 20,000 jobs in the same period. The main areas of housing development are the new town at Cranbrook, and urban extensions at Newcourt and Monkerton, all either astride or beside existing railway lines. The plans also include a science park, plus a business park and intermodal freight terminal at the airport.

4. Roads to the city centre are congested and operate at capacity during the working day. There is limited parking and little scope for increasing it. DCC has therefore invested heavily in public transport, principally through a park and ride network, together with a comprehensive network of cycle routes. Planning policy measures, *e.g.* limiting parking spaces in new employment areas, have been implemented to try and reduce the numbers of journeys to work into the city by car, and remodelling of key road junctions has been undertaken to improve traffic flows. So far, there has been little investment in rail.

5. The city is well served by its railways. Unusually for a city of its size, there are eight stations within the city boundaries. Exeter Central station is, as its name suggests, well sited for the city centre. There are five routes radiating from Exeter, four of which carry a substantial amount of local traffic. Of these the lines to Exmouth, Barnstaple and Waterloo were reduced to single track with limited passing facilities in the 1970s; this rationalisation imposes severe operating constraints, and they are now operating at or near track capacity. A general shortage of rolling stock exacerbates the problem of passenger numbers increasing at well over the national rate, but while longer trains may alleviate current overcrowding they will only help but not solve the problems of future growth.

6. Within the next 15 years Exeter will have undergone a major expansion, both in housing and employment opportunity. The pressure on public transport will be even more intense, and the railway is capable of playing a much greater part in meeting the transport needs of the city. But the current lack of capacity means that it handles only a fraction of the possible traffic. Unlocking the unused potential of Exeter's railway network will in turn help to unlock the city's economic potential. A successful local network will involve more than reacting retrospectively to increased passenger numbers; experience elsewhere shows that frequent, reliable well marketed services will generate a major increase in patronage which would more than justify the relatively modest investment required.



## **The Scheme**

7. There are three principal elements to Devon Metro. The first is the provision of new stations to provide rail access to the new housing developments and major employment areas. The second involves improving the train services to provide a regular clock-face timetable with frequency and train capacity matched to demand; this will also include branding of trains and stations, together with an effective marketing and ticketing strategy. Lastly, there is a need for improvements to the infrastructure to provide the necessary line capacity.

## **New Stations**

8. Four new stations have been identified in the Exeter area, with a fifth – Edginswell - on the Torbay line. Of the Exeter stations, planning for that at Cranbrook is already well advanced and the necessary funding identified. The other three are Marsh Barton, to serve the major industrial estate on the west of the city, Newcourt (where a major housing development is already part complete) and Hill Barton to access the Monkerton urban extension, Met Office and Science Park. There is a strong business case for all three (see attached diagram), and they are currently being progressed – albeit slowly- through Network Rail’s project development stages.

## **Service Patterns**

9. Current cross-Exeter services are based on an hourly Exmouth-Paignton and an hourly Exmouth-Barnstaple schedule giving two trains per hour (tph) between Exeter and Exmouth. Local stations towards Honiton generally get a two hourly frequency from the hourly Waterloo service; a way will have to be found to improve services on this line to provide 2tph to Cranbrook. A need for an additional Paignton service to give 2 tph has also been identified, and a new service to Okehampton may be required in due course. These services should go through to Exeter Central - the hub of Metro services - but cannot terminate there for operational reasons: where they should terminate east of Exeter is not yet clear as track capacity in either Exmouth or Waterloo directions is limited. There is a good case for additional trains to go to Exmouth; the attached diagram shows that this line is where the main demand lies, and it will also ensure that Hill Barton, Digby and Newcourt, the three stations serving the city’s main employment complex, get an adequate service.

## **Infrastructure**

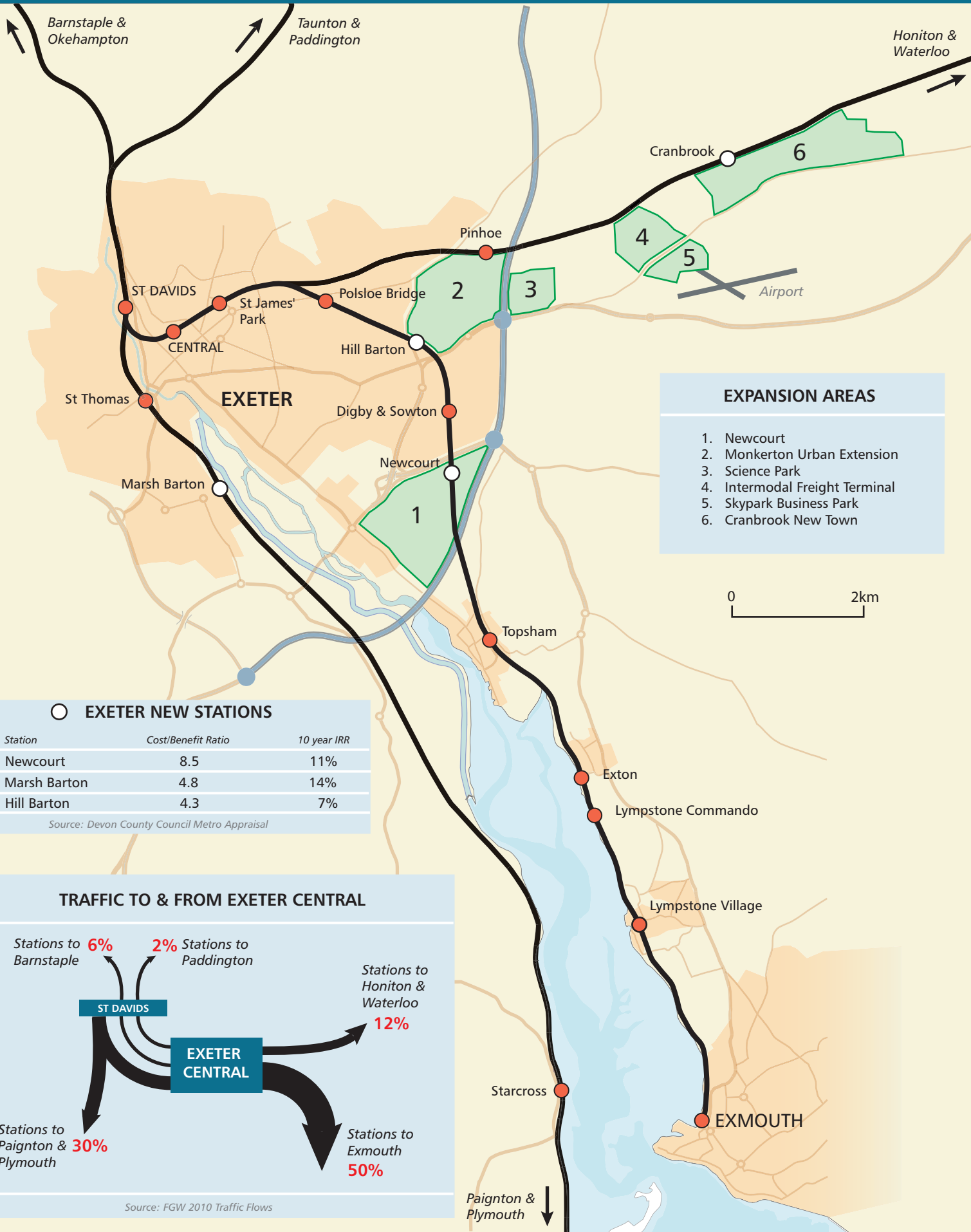
10. Two principal capacity improvements are required. The first is to enable a 4tph service on the Exmouth line, initially as far as Topsham. The geography of this line means that tight scheduling is required to achieve a 30 minute interval service, and the planned new stations can only be accommodated with gaps in the stopping pattern, meaning that some stations would only see one train an hour. Increasing the frequency will require some infrastructure improvement but will enable a sensible stopping pattern with all stations on the line getting at least 2tph. It can be done by re-instating double track between Exmouth Junction and a point near Hill Barton station, some 2.6km, with relatively modest signalling changes. Further extending the 4tph service from Topsham to Exmouth will require an additional loop at Lympstone, and more complex signalling changes which may well need to wait until the whole area is re-signalled in about 2026. The other infrastructure change is the need for additional platform capacity at Exeter St Davids, where the steep bank between there and Exeter Central imposes severe operating constraints. These could be alleviated by adding a single crossover between the local platforms, and additional signals to allow each platform to be used by two trains at once.

## **The Way Forward**

11. Devon Metro is included in the new Devon and Torbay LTP3 and underpins the economic and housing growth proposed in Exeter's Core Strategy. Surveys conducted by DCC indicate that improvements to rail command widespread public support. The priority is now for all the stakeholders to drive the project forward and secure the necessary funding.







### EXPANSION AREAS

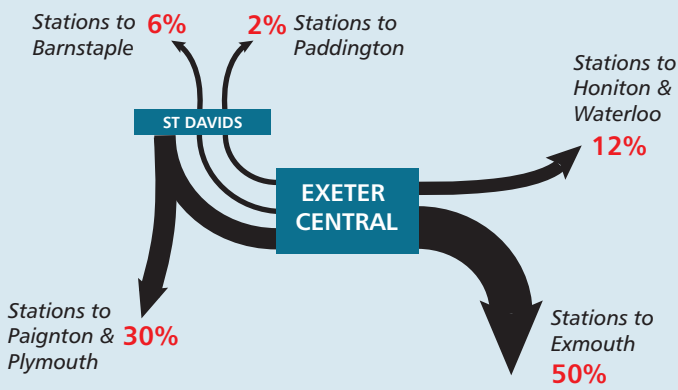
1. Newcourt
2. Monkerton Urban Extension
3. Science Park
4. Intermodal Freight Terminal
5. Skypark Business Park
6. Cranbrook New Town

### EXETER NEW STATIONS

Station	Cost/Benefit Ratio	10 year IRR
Newcourt	8.5	11%
Marsh Barton	4.8	14%
Hill Barton	4.3	7%

Source: Devon County Council Metro Appraisal

### TRAFFIC TO & FROM EXETER CENTRAL



Source: FGW 2010 Traffic Flows



## The case for more trains on Sundays

The line between Exeter and Exmouth is, from Exmouth Junction, single track with one passing loop halfway along its length at Topsham. The maximum line capacity is two trains per hour, with trains passing at Topsham.

This capacity is utilised throughout Monday to Friday from a first departure from Exeter St. Davids at 05.44 until after the evening peak. Thereafter the service is hourly with a last return train from Exmouth at 00.02. A similar service operates on Saturdays, except that there is one less early morning service and the last train runs slightly earlier.

On Sundays a service of one train per hour operates, commencing with a first train from Exeter St. Davids at 08.30. At the start of the current franchise Sunday services did not commence until late morning but, following representations from rail users, Network Rail allowed First Great Western (FGW) to introduce two earlier trains each way, which ran from the start on a commercial basis without subsidy. This was a commendable response to changing leisure and work patterns.

During 2009 the Avocet Line Rail Users' Group (ALRUG) conducted passenger counts on the line on 15 Sundays between March and December. Two further Sundays were counted in the autumn of 2010. Analysis of the counts showed that:

- ◆ From mid morning onwards average loadings vary from around 60 to over 100 in both directions, which is more than Monday to Friday off peak loadings and comparable to the numbers travelling on Saturday (when the service is half-hourly).
- ◆ The largest flow is between Exmouth and Exeter Central, but unlike the Monday to Friday commute and Saturday shopping flows, trains towards Exmouth are usually busier earlier in the day.
- ◆ Overall these flows are neither as weather dependent nor as seasonal as might be expected: although a warm day even in May will boost the number heading for the beach, the trains are busy even in poor weather.
- ◆ The Royal Marines are significant users of the line, with large groups "going ashore" late Sunday morning/early Sunday afternoon and returning from Exeter Central to Lympstone Commando in the late afternoon/early evening. At the latter time there are also significant numbers of Royal Marines, with luggage, arriving at the Camp having changed from mainline services at Exeter St. Davids. These flows are also year round but, paradoxically, they all but disappear during the August high season when the Camp closes for annual leave.
- ◆ Significant numbers travel from other intermediate stations – notably Digby & Sowton and Topsham, with particularly large numbers liable to join Exmouth bound trains at Polsloe Bridge on fine days.



It is probable that the FGW's own figures severely under record passenger numbers: a serious revenue protection issue has been observed on passenger counts, with trains so full that conductors have no opportunity to go right through the train between station stops. Sadly, some groups of Sunday travellers appear to rely on this and deliberate fare evasion is more apparent than on weekdays. Though there are now more opportunities to purchase tickets on weekdays – and more on board ticket examiners – this is not yet so true on Sundays.

Since 2009 additional flows have started to occur when Exeter Chiefs, now playing in the Rugby Premiership, have Sunday home fixtures. Extra trains are usually provided for these occasions – forming a de facto half-hourly service, albeit on part of the line during part of the day. There is an expectation that, when train frequencies are significantly increased, there is a step change in the number of passengers using the service. In the recent past this has been borne out by experience on the Barnstaple line and in particular on the Truro to Falmouth line where doubling the frequency has seen passenger numbers grow by over 97% in three years.

A significant modal shift can be expected on the Exmouth line among the large number of people who use the railway for distant destinations. Although passenger counts suggest that many do use the Exmouth line to start or complete their journey, an hourly service cannot provide good connections at Exeter St. Davids with all trains to and from London, the Midlands and North, the far West, and stations to Waterloo. It is known from observation that many Sunday passengers are given lifts to and from Exeter St. Davids to avoid long and sometimes uncertain waits for Sunday trains. With a half hourly service connectivity with the main line would be greatly improved and over time more passengers could be expected to transfer to and from Exmouth trains."

Train paths are not an issue: a half-hourly timetable is run every other day of the week; there are no freight movements on the line.

Rolling stock is available: a less frequent Sunday service operates on other lines and, even though four coach trains are frequently diagrammed for the Exmouth services during the whole of Sunday in high summer, there is still spare rolling stock visible in Exeter Depot yard.

An application has been made for Community Rail status for the Exmouth line. If this is obtained, there is general agreement among the stakeholders concerned that a high funding priority should be a contribution towards the cost of a pilot half-hourly Sunday service (probably for part of the day and part of the year initially). Devon County Council have indicated willingness to at least match fund this and their contribution has been approved in principle by the County Council's Exe Rail Working Party.

FGW has indicated that a half hourly Sunday service is practical, if satisfactory funding arrangements are agreed.

Passenger figures would suggest that such a service would already be commercially viable. Given that a more frequent service could be expected to attract a significant increase in passenger numbers, it could be anticipated that any subsidy would only be necessary for an interim period.

