



THE DARTMOOR LINE RE-OPENING OF EXETER – OKEHAMPTON RAIL SERVICE

BREIFING NOTES FOR COUNCILLORS

Introduction

The Exeter – Okehampton rail service, to be marketed as ‘The Dartmoor Line’ is re-opening later in 2021 (www.dartmoorline.com) . Network Rail and GWR Trains kindly provided a private briefing to Steve Whiteley and Colin Lee on 22 March. Here are the details:

The Opening

The opening date has not been confirmed yet but will in ‘in 2021’. The legal transfer of the railway and land from Aggregate Industries to Network Rail will be completed shortly.

Network Rail works

Although the track is still in place between Crediton and Meldon, it has been little used for a number of years and has not been maintained for even longer. As a result the track is in a ropery state and will need to be largely relaid with new ballast, sleepers and rail. Drainage also needs to be improved in many locations. This is the major work that takes up much of the £40.5 million approved by the Government.

Councillors may have noticed Network Rail Engineers already busy on the line and at Okehampton there is a huge pile of ballast and new track panels ready to be laid.

Bridges are largely in good condition although some will need remedial works. Vegetation clearance is also required although this will be minimised , with consultation with an Ecologist and Natural England.

Okehampton Station

Okehampton Station will come under Network Rail ownership but they have pledged to retain, and even enhance, the current ‘Southern Railway 1930’ ambience. They hope to lease out space for a café, information centre and toilets. The station will be unstaffed but will have modern facilities including a car park, lighting, ticket machine, information displays and CCTV. Disabled step-free access to the trains will be provided.

PS: For an example of how older stations can be enhanced, pay a visit to Crediton Station, which has been fully restored to pre-World War 1 London and South Western Railway colours. The Station Tea Rooms (when they re-open) are highly recommended.

The initial train service

The initial service will be 8 trains per day, 7 days per week, at a 2-hour interval, running non-stop from Okehampton to Crediton. Half of the weekday trains will run to Exeter Central, with the others terminating at Exeter St Davids, where there will be connections to Exeter Central, Exmouth, Paignton etc. The first train of the day will reach Central shortly after 08:00. Weekend services will terminate at Exeter St Davids.

GWR Trains plan to use Class 150 2-car diesel sets, with extra cars at peak times and in the early days until the usage is established. The line will be designed to accommodate Class 158 and Class 166 units as well – these are 2 – or 3-car trains with more seats and a better performance than the 150.

Why only a train every 2 hours?

The limiting factor is the single line from Crediton to Okehampton (17 miles), which has no passing loops. The signalling system only allows one train to be in this section at any time, and the expected line speed limit will be 55mph. Allowing 25 minutes each way, plus a turn-round at Okehampton, limits the maximum possible frequency to 1 hour. In the beginning there are capacity restraints at Exeter, which limits the initial service to 2-hourly and also limits the number of trains that can run through to Exeter Central.

The train service from 2022

Around Easter 2022, further upgrades and enhancements will be made to the line, raising line speeds to 70mph. Improvements at Exeter will create extra 'paths' and allow 1 train per hour from Okehampton. Around half of all trains will run through to Exeter Central.

What about other stations?

The time taken to run the 17 miles from Crediton to Okehampton, turn round then run back to Crediton, limits the potential for other station stops. The 70mph limit from Easter 2022 should give a margin for one intermediate stop, which logically should be at the new Okehampton Parkway Station (see below). There won't be a margin for any other stops, thus ruling out North Tawton, Bow or Yeoford, even if these stations actually existed.

The only way to increase line capacity for additional stops would be to install a passing loop and new signalling (North Tawton would be a good place!!). Likely to cost £2 – 3 million. This has not been funded in the initial scheme.

North Tawton Station

Unfortunately there is no longer a station at North Tawton. The original 'Up' platform (towards Crediton) was buried when the track was raised over the new Whiddon Down Road bridge in the 1970's. All the land and the old station buildings are now in private ownership. Network Rail only own the track and a narrow strip on the site of the old platform.

Any new station at North Tawton would need to be built from scratch, and the land acquired by purchase. No funding has been provided for this and the cost is likely to be several £million.

Okehampton Parkway

Devon County Council own a site at the Exeter Road Industrial Estate for a 'Parkway' station. This would be ideally placed for the Eastern side of Okehampton and all those new

housing estates, plus easy access off the A30. However, the Parkway station is not included in the initial funding and money would have to be raised (by DCC?) to get it built. Even the design work has not been funded at this point – DCC are currently raising the funding.

Network Rail will allow for a Parkway station in their initial scheme i.e. the track will be laid so as to accommodate a platform at that point in the future. However, even when funding is available, the design, regulatory and construction process means the station could take up to 3 years before it comes into service. Which makes Sampford Courtenay a possible temporary solution.....

Sampford Courtenay Station

Sampford Courtenay station still exists and a few years ago the platform was rebuilt to current standards and has been used by the former Sunday Rover service. A stop here is not included in the current scheme, but the station could be brought into use at a relatively low cost – the platform needs to be resurfaced, a shelter and lighting installed but it's all feasible.

The snag with Sampford Courtenay is the limited space for car parking. The parking area outside the platform fence is not owned by Network Rail and indeed there is some doubt as to who does own it. As far as we are aware, no work has been put into finding more space for car parking.

Bus Services

Feeder bus services and station car parking will be essential if the rail service is to succeed. Bus services – local and further afield – are being discussed between DCC and Stagecoach but there are no commitments or firm plans at this stage.

Okehampton Parkway will include a bus interchange and diversion of some existing bus routes to serve the new station when it gets built.

Options for North Tawton

Given the limitations of the line capacity, the cost and the need to acquire land, we have to accept we won't get a new station in the near future.

It is suggested we do all we can to support Okehampton Parkway and Sampford Courtenay stations with connecting bus services. It is known that Sampford Courtenay Parish Council feel very strongly that Sampford Courtenay Station should be re-opened and Councillors may wish to consider joining forces with them.

A possible local bus route North Tawton Square – Sampford Courtenay (New Inn) – Belstone Corner (Sampford Courtenay station) – Okehampton Town Centre – Okehampton Station might be the only option that would allow North Tawton residents to access the new train service. Provision of car parking at Sampford Courtenay Station would also assist.

Councillors may wish to consider how we could support the rail service and encourage North Tawton residents to use it.