

PROPOSAL

Closing the Gap: The Bude Bus Branch-line Community Partnership

Addressing the Connectivity Deficit of North Cornwall & North West Devon

1. Overview

For historical and other reasons North Cornwall and North West Devon suffer from poor bus/rail connections relative to the rest of the two counties – on the cross-border bus service 6 (Bude/Stratton - Holsworthy - Okehampton). These needs have not yet been addressed by Cornwall and Devon Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs). This proposal sets out a remedy for consideration.

There are compelling reasons why this needs to be addressed:

- The poor bus service suffered by the towns of Bude/Stratton and Holsworthy, compared to all other similar or smaller towns in the rest of Cornwall and Devon (3 hourly compared to hourly).
- Demand exists for a much improved better bus service. Current bus usage does not reflect demand, given (a) the current poor bus service and unsuitable train connections, (b) high usage growth on the Dartmoor Line, much originating in the area, (c) inevitable growth opportunity from a high quality bus service with suitable train connections, evidenced elsewhere in both counties.
- NW Devon's Torrridge area has one of the lowest per capita income levels in the country.
- The great opportunities on this route, provided by the reopened Dartmoor Line, not yet grasped, this being the principle corridor (in area and population) served by the Dartmoor Line.
- The further opportunities for passenger growth arising from the new Okehampton Parkway station, whose business case is focussed on further improving connectivity, primarily to the area served by this corridor (the station start date being the best opportunity to launch a new service).

The proposed service would appear to be a strong candidate for government funding, at the very least meeting all aspirations in the National Bus Strategy ('Bus Back Better'), with added innovation:

- *Bus-rail Integration with services timed to connect with trains.*
- *The bus service planned and operated as part of a whole system with rail which works together.*
- *Connection timings sufficient for people with limited mobility (unlike current connections).*
- *Upgrading infrastructure along the route.*
- *Improving the image of the bus.*
- *Strong formalised collaboration with the community, both councils, bus and rail operators.*
- *Giving bus users more of a voice.*
- *Using data and information to inform service management.*
- *Innovative use of rail realtime information feeds on-bus, and bus realtime on-train.*
- *Ensure BSIPs cover both councils full areas, filling a currently unmet cross-border gap in provision.*
- *Improving rail connectivity for the economically disadvantaged area of NW Devon/ Torrridge.*

The evidence is overwhelming for Cornwall Council and Devon County Council to address the current bus service anomalies in this cross-border area, in line with their strong support for rail services elsewhere.

2. The Proposal: Bude Bus Branch-line Community Partnership (The New 6 Bus)

For Cornwall and Devon to work together as a matter of priority to launch an enhanced service 6 to start on the date the new Okehampton Parkway opens, aiming for a bid for government funding for this innovative scheme, if that can be achieved.

The Scheme:

- 1. High quality single deck vehicles (dual purpose semi-coach type specification).**
- 2. Hourly service, with a shortened route via Holsworthy low bridge; how this is configured, whether all buses are single deck, or a mix of limited stop single deckers and double deckers, must be subject to service planning.**
- 3. Some limited stop journeys (key stops: Bude, Stratton, Holsworthy, Halwill Junction, Okehampton West Street, Okehampton Parkway station).**
- 4. Connecting with down trains at Parkway, 15 min.+ ahead of returning up trains, enabling good bus-train and train-bus connections, that do not discriminate against people with restricted mobility.**
- 5. Train realtime feeds displayed on-bus; bus realtime shown/ announced on trains.**
- 6. Maximising realtime provision at bus stops.**
- 7. High quality interchange and passenger waiting facilities at key stops.**
- 8. Vehicles liveried as 'Bus Branch-line' or similar with National Rail logos, to promote a single bus/ rail brand and integrated service.**
- 9. Bus stops with the same consistent livery/ logo.**
- 10. Excellent printed bus stop information displays.**
- 11. Printed timetable leaflets, mail drops, newspaper ads, etc., with Connect Bude committing to taking a major role.**
- 12. Partnership steering group - including the Community, GWR, both councils, bus operator, as a 'Community Bus Branch-line Partnership' - overseeing the above, sharing/using data to monitor performance/ improve usage, de-snagging and tweaks, engaging communities, identifying shortcomings etc..**

NB

- As new travel patterns need to be established which will take time, there is a need to commit to several years kickstart funding to establish optimum usage.
- Bude/ Stratton has an excellent track record of long-standing community involvement, energy and commitment to partnership working to achieve improvements across a wide range of issues.

3. The Context

3.1. Dartmoor Line: Opportunity or Lost Opportunity?

Okehampton trains are a game changer; since services were restored to the Dartmoor Line in November 2021 there are now realistic possibilities for much improved North Cornwall and North West Devon connectivity to the rail network at this railhead. The purpose of the Dartmoor Line is to improve the economy, and opportunities for residents in this area; the higher than forecast usage since reopening is testament to the line's ability to do this. The business case for the new Parkway station (opening 2025) is based on its ability to serve this area even better, further growth expected. But the opportunity to optimise socio-economic benefits will only be fully achieved by resolving the anomalous current poor bus service on this key corridor so as to optimise bus/rail connectivity.

Much of this large increase in demand to travel on the line is spawned in the Bude/ Holsworthy area. Currently the main corridor serving this area (and the towns of Holsworthy and Bude/Stratton) has only a three hourly bus service with unsuitable connections at Okehampton station - an anomaly as all other comparable towns in Cornwall and Devon enjoy an hourly bus link to a railhead. It is therefore not surprising that bus usage has not increased since the line reopened given the significant service shortcomings.

Bus service 6 is designed for bus scheduling convenience rather than attracting passengers, with unsuitable vehicles for the route length, poor infrastructure for waiting passengers and poorly timetabled rail connections, with passengers frequently missing the train or the bus; if the latter it's a three hour wait (if lucky enough not to miss the last bus). Connections at Okehampton are little more than a token: of one minute to the 1625 train, of minus 12 minutes to the penultimate bus to Bude (yes, the bus leaves 12 minutes before the train arrives) and of 3 minutes to the last bus! Note these are in a three hourly timetable with only six buses a day, so half of the two way connections are partly unusable; most other connections to the train averaging 9 minutes are still insufficient given the length and nature of the route from Bude.

And short connections are discriminatory, on Equality grounds, against people with restricted mobility. Buses have become accessible in recent years, but Okehampton connections are not.

The new Parkway station provides a unique opportunity to promote and enhance the bus service frequency, quality and connections on its opening day. Given both counties' commitment to improving rail usage including through suitable bus links, there is an overwhelming case to make this happen.

3.2. Historical Context: Transition from Commercial to Subsidised Route

Service 6 until Sept 2023 was commercial; Stagecoach had a commercial dilemma, either: (a) to try to keep costs to a minimum by not increasing vehicle workings while trying (in vain as it turned out) to properly cater for all passenger types including the new growing demand to connect with trains at Okehampton; or (b) add another bus working to improve rail connections, adding significantly to cost while carrying the risk that better frequency and bus/ train connections will not increase revenue sufficiently to cover this additional cost. Since Stagecoach surrendered its commercial service 6 registration (September 2023), the route is now under the control of Cornwall and Devon councils, who have not yet reviewed the route to better serve these requirements.

The holy grail of co-ordinating the travel flows of students and other travellers on the corridor makes sense – but only if the service actually serves the needs of the travelling public. Once the Dartmoor Line reopened it ceased to be able to do so, with the service and connections unsuitable for rail travellers.

While council budget pressures are fully recognised, it is also inarguable that, while council decisions on bus service support must take into account the most economic way of providing a supported bus route, the council also has to take into account (a) how the service relates to the relative needs of communities served, and (b) how the service level relates to other comparable communities' services. This is now enshrined in government BSIP requirements; it is clear that, to comply, service 6 needs to be reappraised to respond to the economic and life opportunities the Okehampton railhead now provides - as the communities currently served by the route in both council areas are significantly disadvantaged relative to other comparable communities in both council areas.

3.3. BSIP Challenges; The Anomaly and its Connectivity Deficit

Greater Bude (a large area of North Cornwall), and the Holsworthy area in Devon, have always been a challenge, due to:

- distance from the rail network (much improved since the Dartmoor line reopened in 2021);
- a low quality bus service 6 with poor frequency, and connections, with the Dartmoor line.

Bude mainly looks East over the Devon border, towards Okehampton and Exeter, for its connectivity including to the national rail network, much hospital care and further education – and not towards the major part of the county, served by the Cornish main line, its branch-lines and connecting bus services that have seen recent improvements thanks to Cornwall's otherwise laudable bus strategy. Most visitors to this area come across the Devon border via Exeter whether driving or travelling by rail, and not via the Cornish main line or the main Cornish road network. The Holsworthy area is relatively sparsely populated, creating challenges in trying to link its connectivity needs with other towns and villages to create a viable, well-used route.

While both counties have displayed good partnership working, there is something about their arrangements for service 6 that is clearly not working. While the bus service was a commercial operation up to September 2023, scope for change was, arguably, more limited. There are clearly challenges for both counties in the area served by bus service 6 regarding how to apply BSIP standards that are similar to the rest of these counties, but there are also untapped opportunities.

The shared cross-border nature of service 6 has been cited by both counties as a factor in the poor service – at odds with the national requirements for BSIPs – recently reinforced as Cornwall's single tender approach also means this route lies outside that approach. Accepting that, geographically, both counties might have found this area historically difficult to serve, that has changed; given the new opportunities for travel now offered by the railway, there is every prospect that initial higher costs would be increasingly offset by increased passenger revenue as travel patterns become established. After all, much of what councils try to achieve through subsidised routes is just that: to invest in routes that have potential to grow towards greater viability.

There is more than a small tinge of irony that after the Dartmoor Line reopened in 2021, with much fanfare and hope for improved connectivity into the wide area up to Bude, bus service 6 has further degraded in both (a) frequency, and (b) bus/rail connections at Okehampton station. Until the reopening of the Okehampton railhead, this area was the largest area off the rail network in England, the 'Rail Desert'. Without better bus connectivity, without grasping the opportunities for bus/rail

travel that the line now offers, it will remain a 'Rail Desert' for those who rely on public transport. And that the intended public transport benefits of the Dartmoor Line investment are being designed out, for those in the wider area served who rely on public transport.

There is little doubt that this route is a special case that requires urgent review to bring it, and the communities it serves, into line with service frequencies and standards enjoyed by all other similar populations elsewhere in the two counties. In the context of the current three hourly bus service:

- Bude is the largest community in Cornwall distant from the rail network, and the only one amongst far smaller communities without an hourly bus service to its railhead.
- Holsworthy is the largest community in Devon without an hourly bus service to its railhead. It lies within Torridge District Council which has one of the lowest per capita incomes in the country. It has a function, influence and hinterland far beyond its immediate area, evidenced by its far larger retail offer compared with other similar sized communities.

Supporting evidence is found in Appendix 1 below, which sets out the shortcomings in connectivity and the current service.

3.4. The Passenger Paradox

The orthodoxy that bus usage reflects demand, cited by both councils on route 6, does not stack up when a service is not suitable for that demand. Clearly there are people who would use a good service who won't use a bad one. Otherwise, why do the government and councils invest in bus improvements to increase ridership? And why are there so many examples of councils achieving bus usage growth?

The route saw the operator trying to retain a degree of commercial viability in a marginal service through reducing frequency, before both councils made similar efforts once the commercial registration was surrendered (September 2023). But the reality is that both councils and the operator missed the significant commercial opportunity that the Dartmoor Line provides, to increase patronage through investing in a quality service that properly caters for bus/ rail passenger transfers:

- the higher than expected passenger numbers on the Dartmoor Line,
- the further expected increases in passengers once Okehampton Parkway station opens,
- the business case for Parkway being based mainly on better serving the hinterland than the current town station,
- the Bude/ Holsworthy corridor being the principle corridor serving the Line.

The paradox is that while Devon and Cornwall believe that, elsewhere in their county, usage can grow if bus services can be improved and transformed to become more financially sustainable (through improved promotion and marketing, infrastructure, buses, timetables and routes), they claim, only on this corridor, that poor usage is an immutable inevitability.

Given that similar sized and smaller towns elsewhere in Cornwall and Devon have at least 3 times the bus frequency as this corridor, the demand is there on this corridor too – unless one wishes to claim that people in this area have a drastic lack of desire to travel, wanting to travel perhaps 300% less than people elsewhere in the two counties. It is therefore not credible to say the service reflects

demand, being much more likely to expect levels of bus demand similar to the rest of Cornwall if only they had similar levels of bus service, quality and marketing.

3.5. Summary

There is an overwhelming case for Cornwall and Devon to improve the service 6 timetable and service quality through a joint approach that aggregates the population and benefits along the entire route as a single entity to achieve a service similar to other comparable communities:

1. Bude/ Stratton in Cornwall and Holsworthy in Devon (with a three hourly bus service) are the only communities of their size not benefitting from an hourly bus service to their railhead.
2. Given the significant travel opportunities arising from the Dartmoor Line and its new Parkway station and the current poor bus service, current low patronage is primarily the result of the poor quality bus service with unsuitable rail connections. The reopening of the Dartmoor Line in 2021, and Parkway station in 2025, and the resultant increase in passengers who would use a good bus link, invalidates previous council views that there is little demand for the service, positively tilting the cost: benefit of a good bus service in favour of a much enhanced high quality service and timetable.
3. By both counties working together, previously cited 'cross boundary constraints' can be overcome. An enhanced service 6 with good bus/rail connections will take the connectivity of this area from being outliers outside the stated Cornwall and Devon bus strategies' aims and standards to being treated equably within them.
4. There is an irony that the significant Devon and Cornwall efforts to improve rail services and bus connectivity to stations (and that Devon has worked so hard to realise on the Dartmoor Line), have not been applied in any meaningful way on bus route 6 to unlock the significant socio-economic benefits that the Okehampton railhead now offers to this prime corridor.
5. Train usage has exceeded all rail industry forecasts, with the main area served being the large hinterland served by bus 6. This usage will increase significantly when Okehampton Parkway station opens in 2025, such forecasts forming the basis of the railway business case for it. A good quality bus link is bound to carry a significant part of this increase - just as both counties have seen the great benefit in investing in good bus/rail links elsewhere.
6. A real opportunity exists to make the new service a success through working with both councils, the communities along the route, the bus operator and GWR to collaborate, replicating the Community Rail partnership concept, as part of a Community Bus Branch-line Partnership, based on the principles set out in the Proposal above. The Parkway station start date provides the perfect opportunity for the relaunch of this bus service.

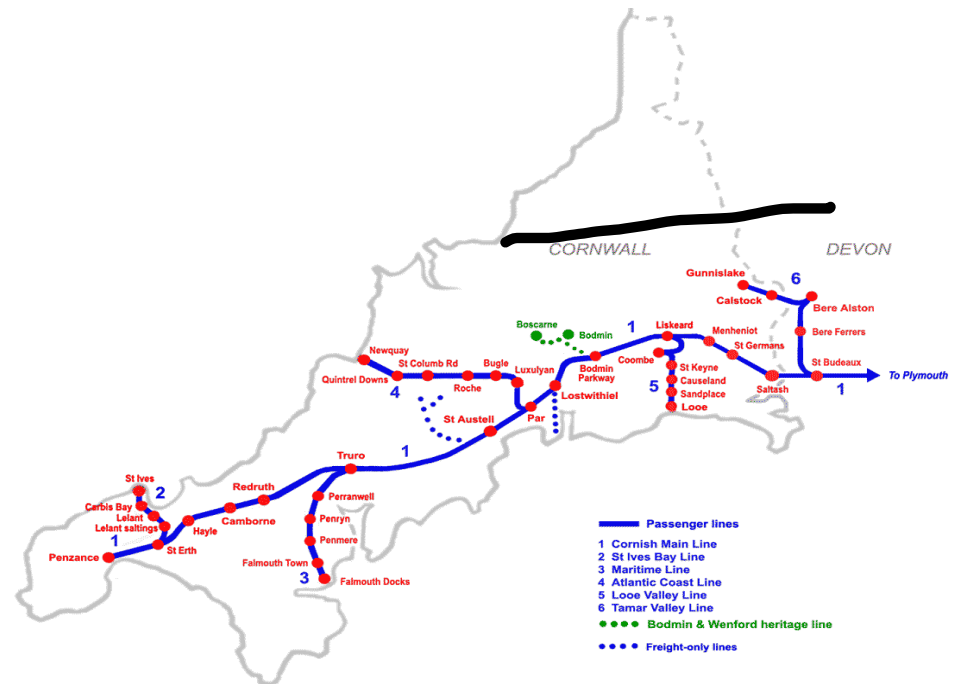
To demonstrate the councils' ongoing commitment to the considerable government and rail industry sums invested in enhancements to their rail network to achieve wider economic benefits to their counties, just as rail schemes use a full cost:benefit analysis that takes into account wider socio-economic benefits, as this is the prime corridor to the railhead, it would optimise benefit to the community to use this analysis on this route, not the narrower assessment of service cost:on-bus revenue – which fails to take into account these wider community benefits.

The minor timetable changes from 14/4/24 do nothing to change this picture; connection times increased by a few minutes when running time is already tight will not improve connectivity.

Appendix 1.

1. The Connectivity Deficit

Fig. 1. The Rail Desert (the large area of Cornwall North of the black line extending East into Devon)



The area (Fig. 1) of Cornwall North of the black line, that area North of Bodmin Moor, looks primarily towards Devon for much of its connectivity – and most of the connectivity needs of Greater Bude. It therefore has not benefited in a comparable way from the BSIP improvements made in the rest of Cornwall – served by the Cornish main line and its connecting bus services South of the line.

Fig 2. Bus Services for Cornish Settlements Distant from the Rail Network

<u>Town/ Village</u>	<u>Pop. (2011 census)</u>	<u>Buses/ hr to Railhead</u>
Kingsand/ Cawsand	1,020	hourly
Portreath	1,336	hourly
Tintagel	1,727	2 hourly
Mevagissey	2,015	ev 90 mins + 2 hourly
St Agnes	2,230	2 hourly
Fowey	2,315	2/ hour
Camelford	2,945	2 hourly
Padstow	2,993	hourly
Perranporth	3,066	hourly
St Columb Major	4,681	2 hourly
St Just in Penwith	4,812	hourly (3 separate buses)
Callington	6,000	hourly
Wadebridge	7,900	hourly
Launceston	9,216	2 hourly (Plymouth), 4 hourly (Okehampton)
Greater Bude/Stratton	12,139	3 hourly
Bodmin (3 miles from station)	14,736	hourly

No other comparable Cornish community at a distance from a station has such poor bus connectivity as Greater Bude, (Fig.2., which for completeness includes Bodmin with its own Parkway station three miles away). The 3 hourly bus service 6 and the 4 hourly Launceston-Okehampton 306 are in stark contrast to the improved higher frequency and quality services in the rest of the county, with comparable and smaller communities enjoying hourly bus services.

And no other comparable Devon community at a distance from a station has such poor connectivity as Holsworthy (Fig 3.), all others of a comparable size enjoying hourly bus services.

Fig 3. Bus Services for Comparative Devon Settlements Distant from the Rail Network
(settlements of a comparable size to Holsworthy)

<u>Town/ Village</u>	<u>Pop. (2011 census)</u>	<u>Buses/ hr to Railhead</u>
Lynton & Lynmouth	1,405	2 ev 3 hours
Tedburn St Mary	1,500	approx hourly (2 buses)
Modbury	1,545	hourly
Woodbury	1,605	2 hourly
West Hill	1,727	hourly
Salcombe	1,909	hourly
Ipplepen	2,446	2/ hour
Bishopsteignton	2,570	2/ hour + 2 hourly (2 buses)
Holsworthy	2,642	3 hourly
Combe Martin	2,687	hourly
Wembury	2,740	hourly
South Brent	2,822	hourly
Uffculme	3,090	hourly
Buckfastleigh	3,326	hourly

2. BSIP Requirements, and the ‘Cross-Border Issue’

While in the past both counties have cited ‘cross-border issues’ as a reason for the poor service, government has set out clear requirements for BSIPs, clarifying that Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) must act to avoid council borders resulting in disadvantaged services. E.g. Government’s National Bus Strategy (‘Bus Back Better’) states:

‘LTAs may also join together to produce joint plans and partnership or franchising arrangements and should be looking to do so where local economies and travel to work areas overlap significantly’.

This statement could hardly be more clear in seeking Cornwall and Devon to work together on the best service delivery for the Bude – Okehampton corridor. It goes on to state:

‘BSIPs will Cover the LTA’s full area, all local bus services within it, and the differing needs of any parts of that area (e.g. urban and rural elements)’.

This is a clear requirement that the needs of this area need to be met within a similar countywide approach, and not treated as an exception to the rest of either county on the pretext that different, perhaps more costly or complex partnerships and mechanisms are required to do so.

BSIPs are also required to focus on how to address:

‘under-provision of bus services and integration with other modes’, and:

set out how they will achieve the objectives in this strategy, including growing bus use, and include a detailed plan for delivery’.

Given the unique (for both counties) bus issues for Greater Bude and the Holsworthy area, the BSIP should undoubtedly reflect these challenges and differences, to both recognise the differences, and include specific plans to improve the area’s bus links in a similar way to the rest of each county.

Further, there is a specific requirement that the BSIP is:

‘expected to ... Drive Improvements for passengers by ... Taking into account the views of local people.’

It is therefore clear that, currently, both counties are falling short of fully and properly applying their BSIP provisions to their whole area as they are required to do.

Bruce Thompson, 7/3/24 (revised 27/3/24)

For OkeRail and Connect Bude