railfuture

Campaigning for better services over a bigger rail network

please reply to:
20 Linden Close
Sticklepath
Barnstaple
Devon
EX31 2HD

tim.steer@railfuture.org.uk

Luke Pollard MP
Plymouth Sutton & Devonport
13 Frankfort Gate
Plymouth
PL1 1QA

luke.pollard.mp@parliament.uk

Dear Luke

2026-10-17

Rail roundtable – Plymouth Metro

I should like to thank you for inviting me to take part on behalf of Railfuture in the recent discussion about the ideas developing around a Plymouth Metro rail improvement scheme. You suggested that it would be helpful to receive a letter from Railfuture supporting the Metro concept for Plymouth. I am pleased to do that and should like to use this opportunity to underline Railfuture's strongest possible support for the Plymouth Metro concept.

In our meeting on 10 October GWR and Network Rail set out various interventions that could be undertaken as part of a Plymouth Metro scheme, including reinstating train services for Tavistock and new stations in the Plymouth area. I should like to start by emphasising why in Railfuture's view a Metro scheme could be of great value for both Plymouth and its surrounding areas and how a wider vision for a Metro scheme could enable real transformation of rail services in the Plymouth area.

With six stations within its boundaries, Plymouth has more railway stations than many cities of its size. With the exception of Plymouth station itself, however, these stations have a very infrequent train service and an erratic pattern of services, with a minimal level of passenger usage as a result. That is in spite of the fact that the major employment site at HMNB Devonport is easily accessible from existing stations. You have emphasised the significantly increased role that Devonport will play as part of increased defence spending in Britain and the need for better accessibility to it for employees and other visitors. The existing smaller stations are all on the western side of Plymouth station. There are also, however, residential and business areas close to the railway in the east of the city which currently have no direct access to train services.

Rail plays an increasingly important role in Plymouth for connectivity within the south west region and with other parts of Britain, but it currently contributes much less than it could to the local transport picture within and around Plymouth.

You have heard from local campaigners and the rail industry how a reinstated train service for Tavistock could enable more regular train services at the smaller Plymouth stations. It could also potentially serve new stations on the eastern side of the city too such as Laira and Plympton as part of a new cross-city train service that could extend further to the existing Ivybridge station with its Park & Ride car park. Railfuture strongly supports these aspirations as the key underpinning of a 'Metro' scheme for the Plymouth area.

I think it is also important, however, to focus on what a 'Metro' could mean for those who do not currently use the train who start to use the future improved train services alongside the smaller number of existing users. The transformation of these people's travel patterns drives

Railfuture Ltd is a (not for profit) Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales No. 05011634.
Registered Office: Edinburgh House, 1-5 Bellevue Road, Clevedon, North Somerset, BS21 7NP (legal correspondence only)
All other correspondence to 3 Chandos Court, Martlesham, Suffolk IP12 4SU

the sorts of outcome/benefits that earlier business case work on the Tavistock proposal had already identified: reduced road congestion, shorter / more reliable journey times, reduced pollution, improved accessibility to major employment / education / leisure opportunities and the concomitant economic growth and housing opportunities. Indeed the word 'transformation' figures large in the HMT / DfT guidance on business cases. I suggest that transformational change is the scale of ambition that should be held for rail in the Plymouth area.

The word 'Metro' has often been used to refer to improved, more frequent train services. What is often overlooked, however, is that the success of schemes such as TfL's London Overground lies in the fact that they have been able to create and communicate a simple picture in potential users' minds of the standards they can expect. These include where trains run to and from, the frequency and regularity of the train service, interchanges with other rail services/buses, that stations are easily accessible / usable and that fares are reasonable in price and easy to purchase. It is that simple, easily communicated and understood overall picture which is at the core of a 'Metro' concept. For the avoidance of doubt, I am not suggesting that Plymouth should aim for the very high frequencies achieved by the London Overground.

Moreover, this does not have to be all achieved all at once through a single physical scheme and can be a longer-term process of increasingly deep transformation. The initial infrastructure upgrade to enable more frequent train services can be accompanied by other elements. Some of these may be achievable more quickly, while others may take longer. This can enable a diversity of funding sources, with some elements potentially funded from non-rail sources, including elements of private sector funding. As well as the more familiar sources of private sector / third party funding (Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy), rail schemes are increasingly using the technique of 'land value capture'. This was shown in the reopening of the Northumberland Line between Newcastle and Ashington in 2024, with new train services running on an upgraded freight line with newly opened stations.

What sorts of things do we have in mind? The following non-exclusive list covers things typically featuring in 'Metro' schemes. Some elements would take longer to achieve than others as part of a longer-term, clearly-communicated overall programme of improvement:

- The existing stations need to have a much stronger visual presence in their area: current residents of St Budeaux, Devonport and the other locations could be forgiven for not knowing that they have a local station at all. We are not calling for large amounts to be spent on branding, but successful Metro schemes elsewhere show that physical salience is important. Changes to the public domain outside stations themselves may be a desirable part of this.
- The stations also need to be easier and safer to access and use, including for disabled people. This does not necessarily mean costly lifts at all stations, but an explicit improvement programme of is needed, while new stations would be built to modern accessibility standards.
- Any new stations with car parking need to have EV charging and the same should be provided at Plymouth station car park. Pedestrian and cyclist access improvements should be explored.
- Both the stations (new and existing) and the train service need to be brought into the digital age to align with modern passenger expectations, with wi-fi where not currently present, better mobile/wi-fi connectivity on the trains and Pay-as-You-Go digital ticketing.
- Interchange opportunities need to be explored, both bus and rail. For example, many buses serve St Budeaux, but nothing in the physical layout of the public domain

encourages intermodal interchange. Equally, St Budeaux could be used for interchange between Tavistock / Gunnislake services and train services to / from Cornwall, but few passengers know that the two apparently separate stations (one named after a long-defunct ferry and road name not featuring on current maps!) are immediately adjacent to each other and could potentially be integrated as a single facility. The current minimal number of calls made by Cornish train services militates against such use. Similar points about bus interchange are also relevant for Plymouth station.

- A view needs to be taken on the level of service provided at the Plymouth area local stations by trains serving Cornwall (currently very minimal), recognising that Saltash and other stations in eastern Cornwall are very much within the Plymouth travel-to-work / leisure area.
- Faster-accelerating, more reliable, higher capacity, more accessible, more comfortable, more environmentally-friendly trains need to replace the elderly 1980s diesel trains currently used. The recently-published Great British Railways Rolling Stock and Infrastructure Strategy posits the use of easily-accessible low-floor battery-electric trains as a norm for the future. We continue to support GWR's 'Green Railway for Growth' prospectus - earlier known as 'Project Churchward' - to achieve that end.
- The long-planned upgrade to pedestrian access at Plymouth station complementing the regeneration of Armada Way needs to feature as part of the wider ambitions for rail in Plymouth, as the station would be of importance within the Metro scheme as well as its wider significance for regional and longer-distance travel.

I should like to finish with a point about governance or the 'management case' as the HMT / DfT business case guidance names it. While it is easy to generate enthusiasm for better train services and improved stations, it is effective management of a scheme that allows such things to be delivered. A key feature of the interventions described here is that they cross existing local government boundaries, meaning that no single existing local authority could easily sponsor the scheme alone.

The Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority is already leading work on a Metro concept for the rail network radiating from the Exeter area that also crosses such boundaries. Railfuture has been playing an active role alongside the CCA and has convened an Alliance of local authorities and other stakeholders to promote the upgrade of the Exeter to Barnstaple line and the potential reinstatement of train services to Bideford. A view will therefore need to be taken on who should sponsor work on a Plymouth Metro, including within the wider context of local government reform and devolution. Whatever the outcome, I should like to assure you of Railfuture's support and offer our ongoing active assistance in promoting the Plymouth Metro scheme.

I trust that the above will prove useful, and if so, might you consider publishing it in order to reach a wider audience and thereby assist with the investment case for Plymouth Metro which we are all seeking to develop and popularise?

I look forward to developing our conversation further when we meet at the Parliamentary Reception being held in the Jubilee Room on Wednesday 25 November.

Yours sincerely,

Tim Steer
Chair, Railfuture Devon & Cornwall regional branch

Rail roundtable – Plymouth Metro