



SPECIAL REPORT TAMAR VALLEY RAILWAY LINE



Calstock Viaduct, built between 1904 and 1907

DEVON & CORNWALL RAIL PARTNERSHIP

Valuing the Tamar Valley Line

Ground-breaking new study quantifies the value of railway to communities in Cornwall and Devon



John Atkins
TAS Partnership

► Valuations of sections of our railway network have been in the background of many recent high-profile initiatives. Crossrail, Northern Powerhouse Rail and various network electrification upgrades have all been underpinned by a cost-benefit case that is used to justify or appraise the investment required. It does so by weighing the outlay cost against anticipated increases in fare revenues and a range of additional accruing benefits that can be monetised to allow a mathematical cost-benefit ratio to be reached. This is a tried and trusted, though by no means fool-proof approach. In this climate of public scrutiny and headlines about the value of large-scale public spending on major rail projects, we should remember that the value of long-standing rural branch lines can easily be overlooked.

In July 2018, a study by the TAS Partnership was published - presenting a valuation of the Tamar Valley Railway Line. The line connects the villages of Gunnislake and Calstock in Cornwall with Plymouth, taking in Devon's Bere Peninsula. The valuation report was

commissioned by the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership (DCRP) and was researched and written by TAS. At the outset, DCRP commented that: "The line provides an important transport link to the communities of Bere Ferrers, Bere Alston, Calstock and Gunnislake as the road options to Plymouth are very poor." In the event, the report provides evidence that the rail line provides much, much more besides.

Impact evaluation has been a significant part of recent work by TAS, with both the commercial bus and community transport sector. Operators increasingly need to justify and lobby for funding support for their work against a more robust evidence base of outcomes. The role of passenger transport in rural areas is also under greater scrutiny

"There is strong use by commuters and school children, shoppers and other leisure travellers"
DCRP

as subsidies for such services are being increasingly reduced due to local authority austerity measures. TAS believes that this was the first time a rural branch line has been subject to such a valuation study.

The Tamar Valley Line is one of eight branch railway lines in Devon and Cornwall promoted by DCRP. The rail network becomes increasingly threadbare in the West Country, so the rail partnership's role is essentially to promote the lines and increase patronage, through engagement with the community, stimulation of economic regeneration, new marketing initiatives, and assistance with service improvements.

The valuation study was the initiative of Calstock and Gunnislake's Cornwall councillor Dorothy Kirk, whose primary objective was for the study to evaluate and to emphasise the economic importance of the Tamar Valley Line to the communities on the Cornish end of the line. Additional funding from the Designated Community Rail Development Fund, backed by the Department for Transport and, the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP), enabled the study to be extended to cover the Devon part of the line as well.



“Our little railway is of vital importance to our communities” Cllr Dorothy Kirk

“Even though the communities served are small, with a combined population of around 10,000, over 190,000 journeys are made on the line each year,” said the DCRP. “There is strong use by commuters and school children, alongside shoppers and other leisure travellers. The connection at Plymouth also allows for longer distance journeys on the mainline to London, locally within Devon and Cornwall and to other regions of the country”.

The TAS evaluation study aimed to take a holistic view of the impact of the Tamar Valley Line, identifying the connection between the service that is provided and the wider benefits that accrue. This underlines the fact that the 190,000 annual journeys made on the rail service are not an end in themselves but enable and enhance a diverse range of activities that would otherwise not take place, or would take place less effectively, or at greater cost: to individuals, to the communities served, to government, and to the environment. So, the benefits multiply with a ripple effect.

There was no ‘before-and-after’ comparison to be made. As the Tamar Valley Line is such a long-established service, no data or experience from before its construction over 100 years ago can be used with any validity for the sake of comparison. Therefore, the valuation process required an assessment, or visioning, of what would happen if the railway were not there or what the likely alternative scenarios would be if passengers had to make other travel arrangements. This links with the wider issue of what impact the loss of the railway would have on the economy and the environment, as the modal alternatives are more expensive to the user and more damaging to the habitat.

The aim of DCRP was to obtain a valuation of the service by its user communities, incorporating the relative values that are placed on the service by local stakeholders. The study presents a snapshot rather than a data set that was designed to justify a specific investment return. The valuation does, however, form a primary evidence base of why the service is worthy of continued development and growth. (One background initiative is a long-standing plan to reconnect the line to serve Tavistock -though it was not the brief of the study to apply a cost-benefit framework to this issue).

Compared to valuations of other passenger transport modes, rail services -with only

station-to-station stops -require more detailed investigation regarding travel habits, hence an emphasis in the study on passenger surveys as the primary data source. Luckily TAS has great expertise in capturing the views of service users and the data collected (with the invaluable help of two committed DCRP volunteers) formed the primary evidence base.

Local stakeholders, many with only limited direct connection with the rail service, were also happy to share their thoughts on the value of the service. Some feedback came from unexpected quarters, such as the Calstock Refugee Outreach Group. Rosie Brennan told TAS: “In our Outreach Group, the railway is a vital link which connects the rural community of Calstock with the refugees and asylum seekers in Plymouth who are often isolated and orientating themselves to a new city or region.”

South West Local Enterprise Partnership made it very clear how the Tamar Valley Line is beneficial: “Rail transport assists with both strategic connectivity and for local transport movements -particularly access to urban areas and also very rural areas. The impact is two-way -both economically and in terms of providing links to the Tamar Valley AONB.”

More expected was the value of the rail service to the world of business and commerce. 25% of rail journeys in the Tamar Valley were for the purpose of reaching a place of employment, and this generates total Gross Domestic Product value for all rail using employees of £2.6m per year. Retail expenditure by rail users was estimated to be £2.9m, and leisure expenditure an additional £2.6m per year.

“The line is a very important part of the infrastructure in terms of leisure and tourism and runs up a highly attractive area,” said George Cowcher of Devon Chamber of Commerce. “Much like the Tarka line, branch lines in the area are attractive in themselves. It also enables access to National Trust properties and other attractions to people travelling from the south west to the UK and beyond.”

Across a range of social, economic and environmental benefits, TAS was able to identify a minimum of £13m overall value per year that the Tamar Valley Line yields, averaging £69 per single rail trip. However, there were many areas that could not be ascribed a financial value, such as the longer-term health benefits of an active lifestyle that many rail users enjoy.

Another aspect that emerged from the TAS report is the fact that the line benefits many people who don’t use the railway themselves. For instance, residents living in the Plymouth Air Quality Management Area near the A386 Northern Corridor route suffer from levels of vehicle congestion, which without the railway would be significantly worse.

Amid the celebration of the diverse benefits generated and enhanced by the rail line, a worst case scenario was also probed -the Tamar Valley with no rail service. TAS was able to calculate with some precision that even with a replacement bus service, the railway ceasing operation would result in 78,000 additional car journeys, involving 1.2 million car miles per year. The cost of this impact is estimated to be £285,000 per year, with severe consequences for journey times, travel costs, environmental damage caused by the increase in car and bus traffic, especially in the Air Quality Management Areas, and an associated increase in road traffic accidents. Tourism and local business would suffer, and the longer-term demographic make-up of the Tamar Valley would change with likely population reduction, as low-paid workforce and younger people move away.

The valuation work has been hugely beneficial to DCRP. “The whole economic future of the area depends on access to the rest of the world - which is what the railway provides and there is no direct road to Plymouth so the railway is a lifeline,” commented councillor Dorothy Kirk. “Our little railway, which must be one of the most beautiful to be found anywhere, is of vital importance to our communities, linking us to the rest of the world and providing access to employment, education, shopping and entertainment. This study has gone into great depth proving just how key the line is to the people of the valley and the economy and thus helping make the case for its improvement and development.” ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ John Atkins is Principal Consultant at passenger transport consultancy, the TAS Partnership Limited, where he specialises in areas such as local authority reviews, the strategic development and social value assessments of Community Transport.