

## **A Railway for Bideford**

The Atlantic Coast - Exeter Railway, aka ACE Rail, was born when former Bideford Town Mayor David Ratcliff came to the unveiling of the Bideford locomotive nameplate making its home back in Bideford. In front of an audience, the Bideford Mayor of the time was heard to say "The nameplate is lovely but what I really want to see is Bideford having its railway service back." That was as recent as August 2021.

Bideford Town Council then invited the Director of Bideford Railway Heritage Centre to meetings and the project name 'ACE Rail' (a hint to the former Atlantic Coast Express) was confirmed. National independent campaign group Railfuture asked the Director of the BRHC to join a virtual meeting to get some basic simple first steps and general guidance. Railfuture then suggested an independent railway advisor for ACE Rail, and the local campaign affiliated to the national organisation. Before long, we had a very special guest contributing sound advice, an executive from the OkeRail team which had just reinstated the Dartmoor line services to Okehampton; many wise words were spoken.

Tarka Rail Association are the long-established rail user group for the Tarka line (Exeter to Barnstaple) and they heard about the ACE Rail campaign through an article in Railfuture's house magazine Railwatch. They invited the Director of BRHC to meetings and the Association then embraced the ACE Rail campaign, which led to the formation of Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail sub-committee. Tarka Rail Association's aspirations have long included a fast rail link to Exeter and two services per hour, definitely needed with pre-pandemic levels of usage - over 650,000 passengers on the Tarka line this year!

This year has been full of tremendous achievements. The ACE Rail presentation to North Devon District Council led to that local authority's support, then Torridge District Council soon asked for the same and Motions of Support meant that a new rail link to Bideford for a faster service to Exeter was formally adopted for inclusion in the new joint Local Plan. The ACE Rail presentation also went to Bideford, then Crediton and most recently Barnstaple Town Councils, every presentation resulting in further support for the campaign. The campaign has been at pains to emphasise that the new 21st-century rail link to Bideford will not simply be a re-creation of its 19th-century predecessor; it will be alongside the Tarka Trail or inland from it in order to avoid sensitive areas such as Fremington Quay and the tunnel and level crossing at Instow.

Funding for a railway consultant to prepare an Initial Business Case for the project was first granted by Railfuture, and then the Tarka Rail Association. We are delighted to confirm that Great Western Railway have now officially backed ACE Rail with support from their Community Fund for the Initial Business Case! The independent railway consultant is now writing the report which is due to be completed in March 2023. As our specialist advisor he is not just looking at a Bideford extension of the Tarka line from Barnstaple but also an upgrade to the existing Tarka line for a fast rail link with two services per hour offering journey times competitive with the private car.

You might ask why Bideford? Well, with over 31,000 residents it is officially the largest community in the entire South West Peninsula which is cut off from rail services! The heavily-populated area needs a modern public transport system which will be transformational for the greater Bideford area, and Barnstaple would equally experience huge environmental and economic benefits.

*Written by Tim Steer, Tarka Rail Association - ACE Rail Lead  
and Roger Blake, Railfuture - Infrastructure and Networks Director*

---