



Proposed Bideford-Barnstaple and Exeter railway gets £6,500 boost

By Tim Steer and Roger Blake

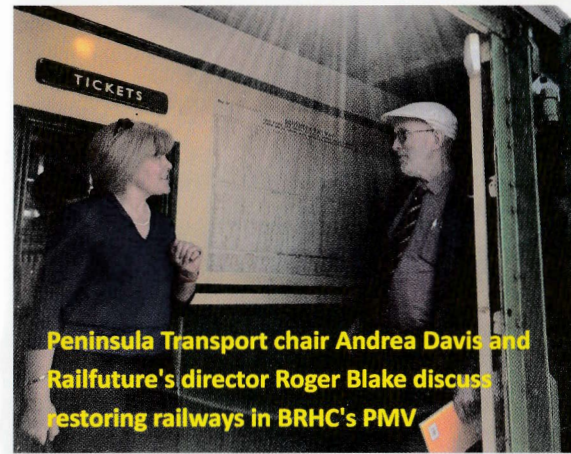
A project to develop the case for an extension and upgrade of the Tarka Line has received a £6,500 grant from Great Western Railway.

The Tarka Rail Association successfully applied for a grant from the Train Operator's Community Fund, which was launched in May to support local communities and address areas of social need.

As part of GWR's National Rail Contract with the Department for Transport, the train operator is committed to supporting schools, colleges, councils, community and other not-for-profit organisations by aiding a number of initiatives.



TRA's Andy Hedges, Barnstaple town mayor Louisa York and ACE Rail's Tim Steer with the Railfuture Gold award for the ACE Rail campaign at Barnstaple station platform 2



Peninsula Transport chair Andrea Davis and Railfuture's director Roger Blake discuss restoring railways in BRHC's PMV

The Atlantic Coast-Exeter Railway project, ACE Rail, aims to give Bideford a boost by extending the Tarka Line to the growing town's 30,000 people, deliberately avoiding the Tarka Trail, and also by improving the existing line to add a second, limited-stop, hourly service to link Bideford with Exeter Central in 60 minutes.

First step is an Initial Business Case to establish a strong answer to the "Why do this, rather than something else?" question. Answers to next questions such as "Where will the line go, where will the stations be, how to fund it?" would then follow from further work.

Tarka Rail Association Chairman Mike Day said:

"We're extremely grateful for this funding from Great Western Railway, which has helped us to engage an independent specialist advisor to produce an Initial Business Case for the Atlantic Coast-Exeter Railway, the association's ACE Rail campaign, reporting by next March. "

"We're grateful, too, for the guidance and support with strategic advice over the past 18 months from independent national rail development campaign Railfuture, which has also contributed financially.

"We have developed a strong base of stakeholder and public support to drive forward a shared ambition to transform the prospects for Devon's largest community without its own rail service since 1965."

GWR Business Development Director Tom Pierpoint said:

"The Community Fund is a fantastic opportunity for us to invest in our communities in projects that really make a difference at a local level.

"We've seen with the reopening of the Dartmoor Line to Okehampton how a local community can benefit from having rail services restored. We're pleased to provide this funding, which can help towards further exploring the idea of extending the Tarka Line to Bideford."

You just read the official press release by GWR: the third sponsor and supporter of the Atlantic Coast - Exeter Railway (ACE Rail) campaign's Initial Business Case;

ACE Rail is now formally part of Tarka Rail Association (Barnstaple to Exeter branch line) with a sub-committee of seasoned group members and former senior rail management that reports in each month. That is not all... ACE Rail is affiliated to independent national rail development campaign group Railfuture who offer guidance and have sponsored the campaign. One of the joys of working with Railfuture is knowing that they have a body of former senior transport planners and rail managers who know how to work a campaign into a strategic plan that is rational, viable and deliverable. They recognised the success of ACE Rail's efforts in July with Railfuture's Gold Award for Best New Group in 2021-22.

It brings me absolute honour to tell our BRHC members that thanks to GWR we NOW HAVE A FULLY FUNDED CONSULTANT! That is correct; the consultant started work on an Initial Business Case in September 2022 and will have a finished report due in March 2023. What will the consultant look into? As defined in GWR's Funding Agreement with the TRA as client for the work, the Project Objectives are:

"1. Produce an Initial Business Case for the Torridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme to reconnect 'Greater Bideford' and central Exeter via Barnstaple;

2. Assess the likely journey times which could be achieved."

And there are two Special Terms:

"1. The Recipient (TRA) shall engage with GWR's Head of Strategic Service Development during the development of the Initial Business Case, to ensure the proposal can fit within the long-term plan for Devon Metro;

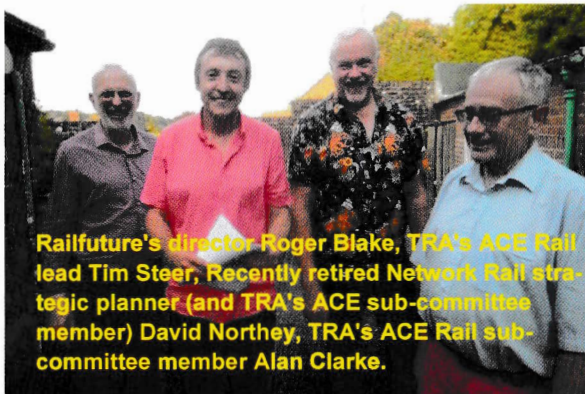
2. The Recipient (TRA) shall engage with GWR's Integrated Transport Manager during the development of the Initial Business Case, to assess the feasibility of bus links in the Greater Bideford area as part of the case for reopening."

The Tarka Rail Association is committed to two things:

1. The existing Tarka line is in need of an upgrade for a faster service;
2. Extending the Tarka line to Bideford to double the catchment area with a new route for a modern fast rail link.

A meeting with the consultant proved a point ;

Leave the Tarka Trail aka South West Coast path (old track bed) well alone! The Instow section was only built for a line speed of 40-45mph and is not viewed by Network Rail as deliverable with the crossings and tunnels. As South West Water now have a riser main utility pipe under the entire surface of the Tarka Trail from Yelland to Bideford (that needs to be dug up from time to time), that too means that we are to leave the Tarka Trail/old track bed well alone. You would have read the same from GWR in the above press release.



In the Summer Crediton Town Council had an ACE Rail presentation and the councillors fully support the campaign: they would love to have a better rail service to Barnstaple and on to Bideford. The MP for North Devon Selaine Saxby, has met with the ACE Rail reps and the Devon County Council lead for Environment, Climate Change and Transport at Barnstaple Stationmasters Café to hear the campaign.

Railfuture's director Roger Blake, TRA's ACE Rail lead Tim Steer, Recently retired Network Rail strategic planner (and TRA's ACE sub-committee member) David Northey, TRA's ACE Rail sub-committee member Alan Clarke.

North Devon District Council has agreed that extending their rail network into Torridge can only bring economic prosperity for their district and so, a motion of support was passed. Torridge District Council had the ACE Rail presentation and that too brought a motion of support. Having both Local authorities in the Joint Planning Policy Committee ...

"resolve that the Bideford to Barnstaple rail link is considered as part of the People and Place project"

has meant that executive officers have to put a new rail link on the new joint local plan.

Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP for Torridge met with ACE Rail, Bideford town council and the Regional growth manager for GWR at Bideford railway station to hear the reasons why Bideford is now high on GWR's list for reopening in Devon. It was a real honour to hear Sir Geoffrey say how much he supports ACE Rail and wants to see the reps next year with the Initial Business Case report in Westminster.

Recently, Barnstaple Town Council asked the ACE Rail lead to attend a full council. The town council agreed to fully support ACE Rail and to put it on their neighbourhood plan. Town mayor Louisa York was quoted saying "There's going to be a lot of work coming out of this, and I propose we support this initial phase." Before the end of 2022, the Devon Rail Forum and a number of Parish Councils around Eggesford will have seen an ACE Rail presentation.

Jointly written by :

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GWR's regional growth manager David Whiteway, Devon County Council's East the Water Cllr Linda Hellyer, MP for West Devon and Torridge Sir Geoffrey Cox KC, TRA ACE Rail lead Tim Steer, Deputy Bideford Town Mayor and Torridge District Council's Cllr Jamie McKenzie, TRA's Chair Mike Day, Philippa Ratcliff, Bideford Town Councillor David Ratcliff.