

Rail revival could radically transform Devon town

What started with one man and a strategic vision could soon become a reality for thousands

DevonLive NEWS By [Lewis Clarke](#)

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Bideford Railway Heritage Centre celebrations (in 2021) by Simon Ellery

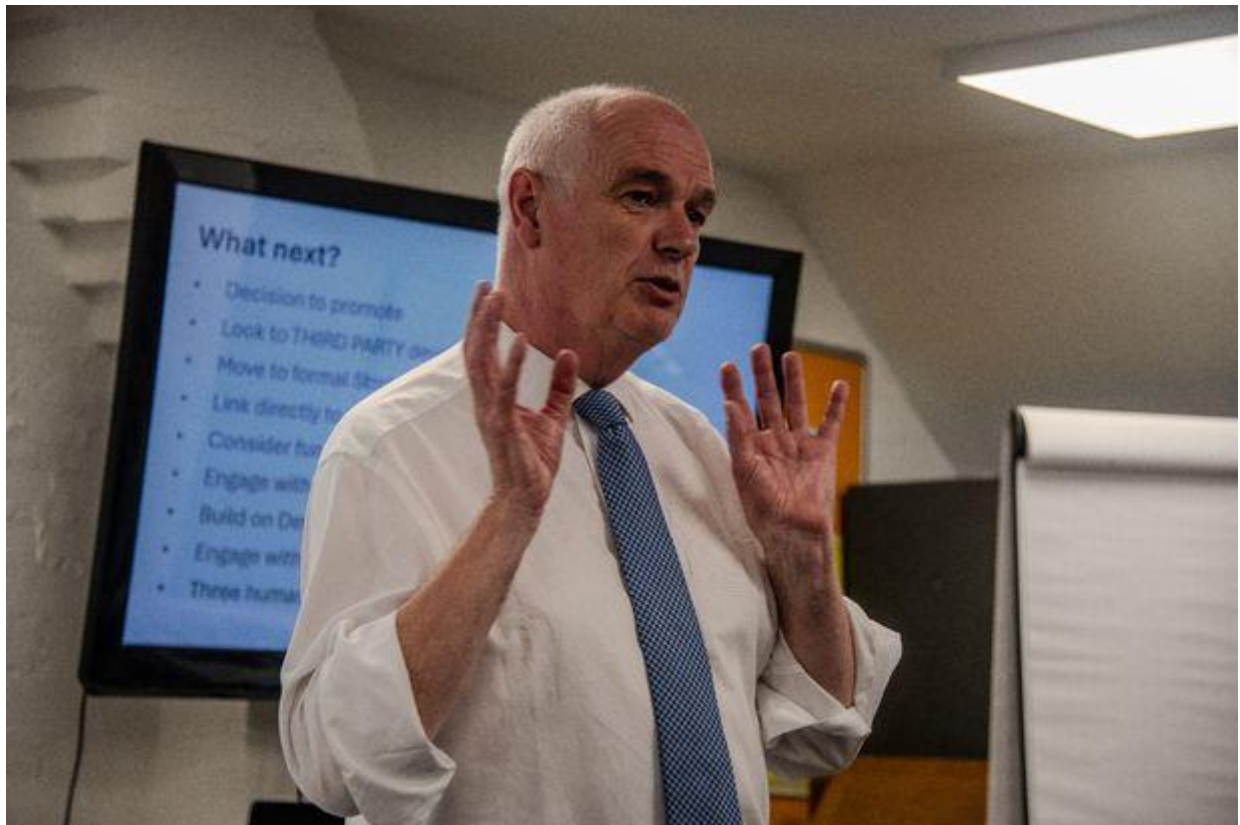
When Ian Baxter stepped off the train in Devon, it wasn't nostalgia that brought him here – though the memory of a childhood holiday in Fremington during the week of Robert Kennedy's assassination lingers with surprising clarity.

Rather, it was a question that's gaining traction in communities across the UK: can local rail investment truly make a huge difference to local life?

Ian, Strategy Director at SLC Rail and a man with deep roots in railway operation and investment, believes the answer is a resounding yes. And for Bideford, a picturesque town long cut off from the national rail network, his message is compelling: this isn't about rekindling the past – it's about reimagining the future.

That future came under serious discussion recently at a pivotal workshop in Bideford, where representatives from five funding partners in the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) gathered to review a preliminary strategic business case.

Backed by evidence from specially commissioned engineering and economic reports by SLC Rail, and chaired by Peter West OBE, the session marked a turning point in the region's ambitions. For the first time, formal analysis sat alongside political intent, with local government players – Devon County Council, Torridge District Council, and both Bideford and Barnstaple Town Councils – aligning behind the cause.



Ian Baxter from SLC Rail speaking in North Devon

“This is not about nostalgia and remembering rather remarkable images of the past,” said Ian, though he admits to a personal affection for the heritage side of railways – he’s also a signman and booking clerk on a preserved line. “The railway is really a means to a set of ends, not an end in itself.”

Those ends, in his view, are threefold: supporting the economy, enabling sustainable housing and community growth, and improving connectivity for regions often left behind.

The numbers tell part of the story. North Devon and Torridge's population grew by nearly 6% between 2011 and 2021, with thousands of new homes planned as part of the local development framework. Yet transport infrastructure hasn't kept pace. “You’ve got about 5,000 new homes in the catchment area of the Bideford to Barnstaple line,” Ian noted, representing roughly 11,000 more residents. “That’s a lot of human beings... and a real opportunity if you’ve got the infrastructure to support them.”

Rail, he argues, could be a cornerstone of that support – but only if local authorities take ownership. “Unless you do this bottom-up, it won’t happen,” he warned. “It has to come from the local community, local councils, town councils, county councils... That’s where real change starts.”

Ian points to a number of recent success stories where local councils – not the central rail industry – took the lead. In Northumberland, for example, a mothballed freight line to Ashington was brought back into passenger service after decades of disuse, backed by both a compelling business case and significant local investment.

“In its first six months it’s carried 500,000 people, about 800 return passengers a day, just like that,” he said, crediting the county’s leadership. “It was partly also building the kind of political confidence that I think all of you need to say: we can take this project forward.”

And then there’s Worcestershire Parkway – a project Ian and his team delivered with Worcestershire County Council. Initially seen as unnecessary by the rail industry, it’s now outperforming its original forecasts by a decade. “It picked an untapped market, people who currently don’t use the railway because it’s too difficult to use,” he explained. “It had a 500-space car park that filled up so quickly because people were previously driving to other regions just to get a train.”



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In Devon, the stakes are arguably even higher. Bideford remains a town grappling with the economic effects of peripherality—its geographical isolation compounded by limited transport options. Meanwhile, Barnstaple has become an urban area experiencing particularly severe traffic congestion. The Alliance’s recent workshop acknowledged both of these pressures and underlined how a new rail connection could be a practical response to both.

“These services offer real hope of a more prosperous and sustainable future,” said Roger Blake, Acting Convener for the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance. “No community which has had its train services restored has ever regretted it.”

Supporters are also buoyed by the scheme’s formal inclusion in the Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority’s Local Transport Plan 2025–40, and the Peninsula Transport Strategic Implementation Plan 2025–50, where it’s recognised as a strategic long-term scheme. There’s also a forward-thinking intention to align future business case development with HM Treasury’s revised Green Book guidance due later this year – an essential move in today’s cost-conscious political climate.

And cost is a major consideration. Reinstating the 10-mile single-track line through Instow – requiring coastal protection and significant civil engineering – comes with a projected capital cost ranging from £300 million to £525 million, depending on risk factors and flood mitigation.

“These are mouth-watering numbers,” Ian admitted. “But in today’s environment, if you go to government and say, ‘just give us the money’, you’ll be disappointed. There are 101 good cases. There isn’t money for 101.”

That’s why innovative financing methods, such as land value capture, are gaining attention. In Northumberland, this approach secured £50 million from just six landowners, transforming the project’s viability. “Without that £50 million, I suspect the Northumberland Line may not have happened – or not as quickly.”

On the economic side, SLC Rail’s modelling paints an encouraging picture. With current housing levels and services, a reopened line could generate 358,000 journeys annually—about 550 return trips per day. With projected housing growth, that figure rises to 550,000 journeys, or 850 daily. Most strikingly, 83% of these users would be new to rail.

“That’s real success,” said Ian. “People were getting off the roads, onto the railway. It’s just as beneficial getting those who currently drive long distances to one station to drive a shorter distance to another.”

It’s not just about passengers either. Sustainable rail infrastructure could reduce pressure on Devon’s congested roads, particularly around Barnstaple, and provide vital support for new housing and employment

developments. But caution is warranted. While initial results are positive, early-stage benefit-cost ratios remain below government thresholds for strong value, particularly with high capital costs.

“If we get the capital costs right, and link it to planned improvements on the Barnstaple to Exeter line, we start to get towards a benefit-cost ratio of two,” Ian said. “That’s high value for money. But it depends on how the scheme is framed, costed, and supported.”

A clear path forward is now emerging. The Alliance, with support from Railfuture and local councils, will need to commission a full Strategic Outline Business Case to formalise the project and pursue funding. “Railfuture has done an amazing job bringing the project this far,” Ian said. “But they cannot be the long-term promoter. It must now be taken up by transport authorities.”

With local sentiment strong, political alignment growing, and professional feasibility established, Bideford’s reconnection with the rail network is no longer a pipe dream.

“This is not just ‘we had a station here once, so we want it back’,” said Ian. “This is about sustainability, social development, and supporting economic growth. And I believe there is now sufficient evidence for you to move forward.”