

'Reopening railway really should not be a priority'

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DevonLive

NEWS|OPINION By Teresa Tinsley

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The Bideford Railway Station building

Railways are reopening across the UK. The previously mothballed rail line, which runs between Okehampton and Exeter, opened two years ago.

Since then, more than 550,000 passenger journeys have been made on the line, far exceeding expectations. The line has been a huge success to date, serving not just the town itself but a wider area extending as far as Tavistock, Launceston and Bude, with connecting bus services, funded by us, to and from Okehampton Station.

Now calls are being made for more railways in Devon to reopen, and support has been given for plans to reinstate the railway line between Bideford and Barnstaple. The line to Bideford was a victim of the infamous Beeching axe in the sixties that slashed the rail network in Britain. The last timetabled passenger service was in 1965 but freight continued to use the line until the early eighties.

But not everyone is excited about plans to reopen the railway. One letter writer, in our sister print title the North Devon Journal, says that would spending millions on the reopening of the line really be the best way to spend any windfall, and that there would so much more than could be done with any cash.

Read the full letter below

I was amazed to learn that our MP Sir Geoffrey Cox is suggesting that any share of the levelling up funding that Torridge might get would best be spent on reinstating the Bideford-Barnstaple railway.

OK, there is quite a lot of public support for the idea, but has it really been thought through? If Bideford had the millions in public funding that such a project would entail, would reinstating the railway be the best way of spending it? What else might be done with such a sum? Once people have got into cars or buses to get to the station, would they really get out of them, park, and wait for a train to get to Barnstaple, when they could stay on the Link Road and be there in 10 minutes? And do they want to go to Barnstaple anyway? What about improving the network of rural bus services, or establishing fast and frequent services direct to the railway network at Exeter and Tiverton?

I am aware that the Government has recently announced additional funding to help Devon attend to the appalling state of our roads, but the amounts quoted won't clear the backlog of repairs till 2034. Meanwhile, are we expected to fill in our own potholes?

I have not seen any analysis which shows that a railway connection between Barnstaple and Bideford should be top of any transport agenda. In fact, it would be hugely disruptive in the short term for residents along the whole length of the line and everyone who enjoys using the Tarka Trail. And I am very dubious about claims that such a project would regenerate the area when there are far more effective and deserving projects which would cost much less.

I agree that rail transport may be better for the environment, but what about implementing the recommendations of the local cycling and walking infrastructure plan? Or getting on with the multi-use trail through Kenwith Valley along the track of the old railway line which has featured for years in strategy documents without any progress being made? These would bring real benefits to our health and wellbeing as well as cutting carbon and being attractive to visitors.

After a long period of austerity and lack of investment in public services, we are not short of other projects which would safeguard our environment, benefit residents, and boost skills and opportunities in the local economy.

What about seeing to our flood defences, or updating the sewerage system? Or transforming the harbour and riverside area as a showcase for our maritime heritage, including a footbridge over the Torridge? If reinstatement is the name of the game, what about reinstating Bideford Art School as a University of the Arts? Or regenerating brown field sites such as Torrington Creamery for public good – I have heard a Sports Centre mentioned. And as far as our heritage goes, the Town Hall and old library building are in desperate need of repair and repurposing.

I am full of admiration for what the Railway Heritage Groups have achieved, both in Bideford and in Torrington. Long may this work continue. But let's not claim that reinstating the railways would combat the sort of deprivation that makes us eligible for levelling up. Sir Geoffrey is taking us for a ride if reinstating a disused railway line at massive expense is the best he can come up with.

Teresa Tinsley

East-the-Water