

North Devon rail update: milestones, new trains and future plans

Railfuture and the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance present Bideford-Exeter train proposals to Torrington District Council as campaign highlights economic benefits, engineering feasibility, and Tarka Trail considerations

Local North Devon transport champion Tim Steer looks back and ahead to plot future for passengers



Tim Steer at Barnstaple train station. Credit: Tim Steer

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By Tim Steer

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ANOTHER year has gone by and I am reflecting on what achievements and challenges we all had on the Devon rail network.

We began 2025 with reflections on the Friends Of Barnstaple Railway Station's (FOBRS) first year which had seen them win three high-level regional awards: the South West in Bloom Outstanding award for the station, the Stations in Bloom Gold award and the Judges' Special Award with a trophy for their recycling efforts.

In February, the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) welcomed Lapford Parish Council as its latest new member. Instigated in December 2023, the Alliance of over two dozen partner and stakeholder organisations lobbies decision-makers and fund-holders to modernise the North Devon (Tarka) line and its services, and extend them to Bideford.

In March, the NDRDA held its second annual convention for partner and stakeholder representatives in Barnstaple. Railfuture's national board director for infrastructure and networks, Roger Blake, who is acting convener of the NDRDA, said: "The line is so popular that it's usually standing room only, including on weekends. We must find ways to increase capacity so that everyone can get a seat."

The very next week, GWR announced the planned introduction of 68 additional carriages to their fleet, in 26 two and three-car Coradia Class 175 trains which can couple to add capacity.

In April, I was delighted to announce the success of FOBRS group's bid to GWR's Customer and Communities Improvement Fund (CCIF) for environmental improvements at Barnstaple station. They will include interpretation boards celebrating the station's history, new planters to brighten the platforms, and a specially designed bug house to support local biodiversity.

In May, Barnstaple Town Council agreed to make a substantial donation towards the costs of an economic assessment of extending Exeter-Barnstaple train services to Bideford.

In June, I was honoured to be nominated, seconded and duly elected as chair of the Devon & Cornwall regional branch of Railfuture, the long-established independent national pro-rail lobby group which had co-founded the NDRDA and is an umbrella to national rail campaigns.

In July, the new Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority adopted the new Local Transport Plan for 2025-40. Roger Blake commented: "This completes the twin building blocks of regional transport planning for years to come, following the adoption in March by Peninsula Transport of their Strategic Implementation Plan 2025-50. Both plans include favourable references in particular to the pressing need for the modernisation and extension – to Bideford – of North Devon Line passenger train services."

This was a historic moment as it meant the NDRDA could carry on studying the Bideford rail extension with formal transport authority backing.

In August, a triple anniversary celebration took place on the first day of the month with a community event at the former South Molton Road, now King's Nympton station. In the national Railway 200 anniversary year, the NDRDA co-ordinated the event to mark the 171st anniversary of the opening of the station and line through to Barnstaple on August 1, 1854, and the station's re-naming on March 1, 1951.

In September, the NDRDA held a workshop in the Burton at Bideford for study funders' representatives to consider presentations on the results of the economic assessment and initial engineering feasibility review for extending Exeter-Barnstaple services to Bideford. The study was funded through the county, district, and town councils, plus Railfuture.

In October, Railfuture Devon & Cornwall regional branch responded to North Devon UNESCO Biosphere's consultation on its new 10-year strategy, as the Biosphere area extends as far south as Copplestone on the existing railway line to Exeter as well as west over a potential new line to Bideford.

In November, a petition highlighting the plight of North Devon (Tarka) line users was started by North Devon MP Ian Roome, and circulated by Railfuture Devon & Cornwall. If you have yet to sign this petition, please do so as it is the only way we will have our voices finally heard in Westminster.

In December, official figures confirmed record-breaking annual growth of usage of almost all North Devon (Tarka) Line stations; evening peak conditions at Exeter Central were described as like a 'mosh pit'. FOBRS ends the year on a high with the unveiling of the GWR CCIF-supported bug house at Barnstaple station.

The new year will start with another town council, Holsworthy, considering joining the NDRDA. Torridge District Council will be scrutinising the economic assessment and initial engineering feasibility review for extending Exeter-Barnstaple services to Bideford, which they had supported from their UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation for feasibility studies. Mid Devon District Council will also be considering joining the NDRDA, while Sheepwash Parish Council will receive a progress report on restoring train services to Bideford, and Crediton Town Council will receive a presentation from Railfuture Devon & Cornwall.

Coming up in March, the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance will hold its third annual convention, in Mid-Devon, for representatives of its steadily-expanding membership of partner and stakeholder organisations.

And finally, in 2026 we will see some of the class 175 GWR trains in service on the North Devon and Dartmoor lines.

Happy new year!