

County Council MOTION – agenda item 21, Tuesday 24th February 2026

North Devon Line Modernisation, Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance membership

Proposed by: Councillor Graham Bell

The North Devon Line supports hourly train services between Exeter and Barnstaple, and also Okehampton, and is confirmed by multiple official data sources as the most successful for post-pandemic usage growth in Devon and the wider South West, and also one of the most successful nationally.

Recent extreme weather and its prolonged after-effects have however reminded rail users in North Devon, also Mid-Devon and West Devon, of what happened to the coastal railway in the Dawlish electoral division of Teignbridge District almost exactly 12 years ago. As twice before during this winter, North Devon Line services have been suspended for weeks, as for a while was some of the track after its foundations were washed away! River flows have been too high and too strong for bridge inspections. Replacement road transport has been haphazard, compounded by closures and poor road conditions on the A377.

North Devon MP Ian Roome recently presented a petition in Parliament calling for urgent investment in resilience measures, and Network Rail with GWR and other stakeholders have been developing proposals which address the need for comprehensive modernisation of the line as a contributor to an 'Exeter Metro' network coupled with a heightened emphasis on greater weather resilience.

In parallel, the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA), instigated by national voluntary pro-rail lobby group Railfuture in late-2023, have through their independent adviser Peter West OBE CMILT led the production, pro bono, of a Preliminary Strategic Business Case (P-SBC) aiming to accelerate the process by setting out the strategic case for change to the North Devon Line in a manner recognisable to decision-makers and funders.

The work of the NDRDA has contributed to and is now reflected in official policies represented by the Devon & Torbay Local Transport Plan 2025-40, Peninsula Transport's Strategic Implementation Plan and Delivery Plan 2025-50, and most recently the Combined County Authority's Corporate Plan 2025-35 which explicitly identifies "support and lobby for upgrades to the Tarka rail line" as an early priority scheme.

The NDRDA is an informal multi-agency, cross-sector and all-party association of partners and stakeholders, without financial obligation, and joining involves no more than a council simply passing a Resolution indicating its commitment to being identified formally as a member. The added value for all is the coherence of one single, all-inclusive and unified lobby when it comes to addressing decision-makers and funders, especially at the very highest levels where ultimately the key decisions are taken. Already five more local councils have joined the Alliance this year on that basis - one District, two Towns and two Parishes - with North Devon District to follow hopefully the day after this County Council meeting, to make a total of 18 districts, towns and parishes.

Other partners and stakeholders include Network Rail, Great Western Railway, Peninsula Transport and the Peninsula Rail Task Force, the Combined County Authority, Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, TravelWatch SouthWest, Friends Of Barnstaple Railway Station and Friends of King's Nympton Station, North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group, North Devon UNESCO Biosphere, Navantia UK (Appledore), South West Business Council, University of Exeter, Petroc College (now North Devon College), and Members of Parliament (Ian Roome MP, Steve Race MP, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC MP, Rt Hon Sir Mel Stride MP).

The Alliance held its inaugural annual Convention in Torridge (Bideford) in March 2024, its second in North Devon (Barnstaple) in March 2025, and the third will be held in Mid-Devon (Eggesford) early next month. Invitations have been sent to the County Council Leader, four Cabinet and two other members.

Roger Blake - Acting Convener, Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance
and Infrastructure & Networks Director, Railfuture national Board
Tim Steer – Chair, Devon & Cornwall regional branch of Railfuture