

Devon County Council wins rail service award

Devon County Council has been recognised by Railfuture as a “torch bearer in rail development” for its achievements in delivering new stations, restoring old lines, and integrating bus and rail services.

By Lewis Clarke

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Britain's leading independent organisation campaigning for better rail services has honoured Devon County Council with a prestigious award. Railfuture has named the Council a “torch bearer in rail development” and presented Councillor Andrea Davis, Devon’s Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport, with its Judges' Special Award.

The accolade from the judges of Railfuture’s Rail User Group (RUG) awards is in recognition of the County Council’s sustained delivery of rail projects across Devon. It’s the first time Railfuture has presented an award to a local authority and it praised Devon for a series of rail and public transport improvements including:

- the opening of Marsh Barton Station as the most recent of three new stations in the Devon Metro,
- being awarded DfT funding for the Strategic Outline Business Case for the Tavistock to Plymouth Restoring Your Railway project,
- its role in the reopening of the Dartmoor Line, followed by securing Levelling Up funding for a new rail station on the east side of Okehampton,
- strengthening bus and rail integration with dedicated bus links including connections between Tavistock, Bude and Launceston with the Dartmoor Line and providing additional funding for bus services in rural North Devon to enhance connections to Barnstaple Railway Station.

They also highlighted that these projects had been achieved through Devon's close working with train operators and other key stakeholders.

Councillor Andrea Davis said: "This award is an unexpected honour and an incredible achievement for the County Council. Our Devon Metro vision has a strategy to improve access to rail services in order to support economic growth, decarbonise transport and connect communities across Devon. To have delivered three new railway stations in recent years as part of this vision has taken a huge commitment, but all credit goes our staff who have been involved in making it possible. Partnership working has been key to that success as well and we will continue to strive for further improvement. It's extremely pleasing to know that effort has been recognised by Railfuture and we thank them for this award."

Christian Wolmar, award-winning writer and broadcaster and Honorary President of Railfuture, presented the award to Councillor Davis. He said: “In this 9th year of our awards this is the first to a local authority, one which has a very proud record of delivering a succession of rail and other public transport improvements to benefit the county's residents, businesses and visitors. This is what happens with clear leadership and strong partnerships.”

Tarka Rail Association is the rail user group that looks after the needs and campaigns for the users of the Barnstaple to Exeter line. The TRA also has an active campaign named ACE Rail (Atlantic Coast - Exeter Railway) that looks at upgrading the existing line for a faster, better capacity and frequency service and to also extend the line to Bideford.

There from the Tarka Rail Association was their lead officer for the ACE Rail project - Tim Steer. Tim was thrilled to be joint Railfuture Campaigner of the year (Gold Award) for all the work put into the Tarka line service upgrades and the recognised need for an extension to Bideford. This was not the only time Tim had his name called as he received a further two awards: the Bronze Award for Best Campaign - Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail campaign - and the Gold Award for Best Social Media for Tarka Rail Association and ACE Rail Facebook groups.

Tim gave a presentation thanking all those who support and help with the campaign work. Tim's presentation explained that it was only a year ago that he had been asked to attend Railfuture's award ceremony for Best New Group (ACE Rail) and since then many local MPs, local authorities, groups and the railway operator had written motions of support towards ACE Rail. Videos were played in Tim's presentation. The first showed GWR's MD Mark

Hopwood CBE interviewing Tim last December at Barnstaple station. Then a month later Mark Hopwood was talking at a House of Commons Transport Committee session on Rural Connectivity about how he had met the Tarka line representatives at Barnstaple and that the line was suffering from Victorian era infrastructure that needs investment. The third video showed North Devon MP Selaine Saxby in a Westminster Hall debate on the Restoring Your Railway Fund, mentioning positively the TRA and its ACE Rail campaign.

Dartmoor Railway Association is the volunteer organisation dedicated to supporting the former London & Southwestern Railway / Southern Railway route between Meldon Viaduct and the site of the former Coleford Junction, centred on Okehampton Station. In 2021 GWR with Network Rail and Devon County Council restored the rail link to Okehampton, and the Dartmoor Rail Association were delighted as the Okehampton railway station once again became alive with an hourly Dartmoor Line service to Exeter. The Okehampton railway station is now a picturesque heritage-looking site with cafe, museum centre and the DRA's own shop. There for the awards was Chair of the Dartmoor Rail Association Sue Baxter who received the joint award for Best Website (Gold). Sue gave a presentation on why the Dartmoor Railway Association was significantly noted by the judging panel of railfuture Vice-Presidents with its up-to-date news section, history, gallery and even free section for former issues of its Pony magazine in pdf format.

Devon was mentioned and awarded more times than any other county for all the work that has been noticed locally and nationally. It came as quite a surprise that the coveted Judges' Special Award went not to a Rail User Group but for the first time to a local authority, Devon County Council. There to receive the award was the Council's Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport - Councillor Andrea Davis - who received the award for outstanding dedication towards rail development and public transport. Councillor Davis gave a fantastic closing presentation to the awards ceremony, speaking about the recent projects that County had helped through to completion: the Dartmoor Line (Okehampton to Exeter), Dawlish sea wall resilience project, Marsh Barton railway station and various bus connectivity programmes that get the public to stations such as Barnstaple and Okehampton on time for departing railway services.

Railfuture is a voluntary group representing rail users, with 20,000 affiliated and individual members. Railfuture is not funded by train companies, political parties or trade unions.

For more information visit <https://railfuture.org.uk/Welcome-to-Railfuture>

Nine pictures in the same sequence as in original online article.



