

New Devon rail link could radically transform deprived town

Discover the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance's ambitious project to reconnect Bideford to Barnstaple

Devon Live By [Lewis Clarke](#)

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The first meeting of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance and its supporters

The launch of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance has marked a significant step forward in the dream of reconnecting **Bideford** to **Barnstaple** by rail.

Backed by prominent local authorities and figures, the Alliance aims to restore the missing link and upgrade the existing Tarka Line between Barnstaple and **Exeter**.

Speaking at the launch event at the Royal Hotel in March, Bideford Mayor Jamie McKenzie said he sees the project as a catalyst for regeneration.

"It will have a great effect on Bideford," he declared. It's going to have a regenerative economic effect. We're an area of deprivation, and I think this project will help the future of Bideford, give us hope and prosperity, and connect us back to the rest of the world."

Barnstaple Mayor Louisa York echoed the enthusiasm, highlighting the project's alignment with the town council's strategic goals: "This is an exciting opportunity to put **North Devon** back on the map," she said. "In January, Barnstaple Town Council voted to be part of this opportunity... This is a golden opportunity to transform our transport network."

Statements from local MPs Geoffrey Cox and Selaine Saxby pledged support for the initiative.

MP Cox, acknowledging "substantial support in Torrington," emphasised the need for a feasibility study.

He said: "Housing and population growth are likely to require improved communication links in the future. Such a link would no doubt require upgrading the line between Barnstaple and Exeter, and that would have incalculable benefits for all of Torrington."

MP Saxby pointed to the potential for reducing road congestion, boosting tourism, and creating new educational and employment opportunities.

"As many of you in the local area have seen recently following the Cedars Roundabout traffic disruption, commuting by the roads in North Devon can sometimes be difficult and frustrating," she said.

"In the summer seasons, especially, the roads around North Devon can become gridlocked with an influx of tourists coming to enjoy our beautiful beaches and countryside. Whilst we welcome and appreciate tourists and the benefits they bring to our economy, our roads often bear the brunt of an uplift in traffic that can be difficult to manage for everyone.

"Therefore, the proposal to re-establish the old railway between Barnstaple and Bideford, although not necessarily a replica of the former route, would be a huge advantage for locals and tourists alike. Providing visitors with an ease of access between the two would both encourage more tourists to come here by train reducing the number of cars on the roads.

"Students and workers will also have increased opportunities to travel safely to additional learning or employment centres, allowing more people to get involved in projects for their own personal or professional development.

"Improved access and reduced road traffic would positively impact the economic prosperity of Barnstaple, Bideford, and the wider region.

"Re-establishing this rail link will be the next natural progression of upgrading the Tarka line, increasing the number of trains and carriages, particularly to the early morning journeys."

Matt Barnes, head of strategic service development for Great Western Railway, shared the optimism.

"North Devon is a fantastic success story for the railway," he stated, citing the growth experienced on the Tarka Line after service enhancements.

"Twenty years ago, the Tarka Line was a quiet rural line, but after the council funded some service enhancements, we saw the line grow between Barnstaple and Exeter, and we've seen that again over the last five years. So much so, it's the most successful line on our network regarding growth post-Covid, and arguably the whole country. We are over 20 per cent, closing 30 per cent above pre-Covid.

"There are real reasons for hope, and a big focus has to be on how we carry on that development growth of the North Devon line. **Network Rail** spent a lot of money enhancing the route over the years, making it fit for the 21st century. A lot more would be needed on the North Devon line, but we've got a great opportunity."

He acknowledged the challenges ahead but stressed the importance of a "strategic vision" and a "coalition of the willing."

"It'll be a long road to get the North Devon line to where we believe it could be," he said. "It'll probably be an even longer road to make Bideford happen, but that doesn't mean it's not worth it."

Network Rail representatives offered guidance and support. Mike Smith, program director for the Restoring Your Railway program, emphasised collaboration.

"The success of those restoration projects, particularly in Devon, is down to the relationship between Network Rail, the train operating company, and the promoting people," he said.

Marcus Jones, route director for the Western Route at Network Rail, acknowledged the bureaucratic hurdles but encouraged persistence.

"You're going to get told 'no' a lot," he said, "Ignore it.

"Projects like this are fantastic things that can be achieved, and I see we can do it."

Tom Hart, the former general manager at Appledore Shipyard, who is now setting up the yard for a major contract beginning next year, said: "Firstly, professionally wise for the yard," he said, referring to Appledore Shipyard, "it really would boost our ability to attract employees from further afield.

"It is an issue we have faced in the last year as we are recruiting more and more people. Public transport to get to the yard is now becoming increasingly important. With the major project coming into the yard next year, we have 200 employees, and when the project starts, we will have 350 people. We will need much better public transport.

"On a more personal level, as the father of a 16-year-old who is just about to finish his GCSEs and go off to Exeter College, the college said they have loads of students from Bideford. They have to get to Barnstaple first, and then they get the train. Wouldn't having the train on the doorstep here be wonderful?"