

Key developments in Bideford's railway revival hopes

The future of the Tarka Trail is revealed



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By **Ella Sampson**

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A proposed rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford has ignited discussions among locals, with varying sentiments emerging regarding the potential project's feasibility and impact.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which was established on March 1, has put forward plans to establish a new railway connection between the two towns while also upgrading the existing Tarka Line, which links Exeter and Barnstaple.

Bideford, whose railway station ceased public operations in 1965 and closed completely in 1982, could potentially see a revival of its transportation infrastructure through this initiative. The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance aims to revitalise the area, recognising the economic challenges Bideford has faced since the closure of its railway station.

The proposed rail link has garnered support from some prominent figures.

Selaine Saxby, MP for North Devon, highlighted the need to enhance connectivity in the region, acknowledging the strain on current train services to Exeter.

She said: "We need to improve connectivity into North Devon. We have a fantastic train station in Barnstaple, which I am delighted to have helped save their ticket office! But spending time with the station team only last week with the Transport Secretary, Mark Harper, it is clear that many trains are at capacity to Exeter and we need to start making plans to increase capacity on the line, this initially may be extra rolling stock, or increased services, but rail improvement plans take decades to come to fruition, and I am pleased to see these conversations already under way."

Similarly, Sir Geoffrey Cox, MP for Torridge and West Devon, voiced his backing for the reopening of rail communications, citing potential economic benefits and the need for improved transportation links to accommodate population growth.

He said: "I support the reopening of rail communications to Torridge and West Devon wherever possible. Last year, I held an extremely informative and constructive meeting with First Great Western Railway (FGWR) at the old Bideford Station who advised me the extension was at the top of their list of achievable projects in the South-West."

However, concerns have been raised by some local residents, particularly regarding the impact on the Tarka Trail, a popular tourist attraction in the area.

Despite the enthusiasm expressed by some individuals for the project's potential benefits, others remain sceptical about its cost-effectiveness and convenience compared to existing transportation options.

Others did welcome the idea however, stating it would be "great if it ever happened" and saying it "would be great for Bideford."

Tim Steer, spearheading the Northern Devon Rail Alliance campaign, revealed to the Gazette that the forthcoming consultation would unveil the project's cost, although a date for this consultation remains undisclosed.

This consultation aims to determine the nature of the rail system, whether it would be a light or heavy rail, among other considerations.

Collaboration with Torridge District Council will also be pursued to explore various grant options to further support the project.

Mr Steer, who is also the Vice Chair of the Tarka Rail Association and the ACE Rail Lead Officer, clarified that funding for the project would not be sourced from local councils but rather from the Department for Transport, given its categorisation as a business case and transport project.

Assuring preservation of the Tarka Trail, Mr Steer outlined the plan for a sustainable railway to run alongside it.

He said: "The Tarka Trail will never be taken away."

Drawing parallels with the Exeter to Exmouth Avocet Line, which coexists with the Exe Estuary Trail, Mr Steer emphasised the feasibility of such projects.

While the location of a potential railway station in Bideford remains unknown, investigations will be conducted with the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) who is the next body of work for this project.

This will be to identify the optimal spot for accessibility to cars, locals, and walkers.

Mr Steer expressed full support for the initiative, describing it as "absolutely fantastic," and commended local councils for embracing and grasping the concept as a means to rejuvenate the area.