

South West railway reopening calls for historic Tarka Line

Meeting calls for progress towards reinstating passenger services to Bideford

By [Lewis Clarke](#)

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The North Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA) held its second annual meeting in Barnstaple, providing a detailed update on their efforts to modernise the Tarka Line and progress towards reinstating passenger services to Bideford.

The meeting saw local government representatives, rail industry leaders, and strategic transport planners come together, each offering insight into the progress made, challenges faced, and future priorities for a region whose transport infrastructure is increasingly strained due to rising demand and limited capacity.

Launched in late 2023 by Bideford Town Council, in partnership with the Tarka Rail Association and Railfuture, the NDRDA has quickly grown to include a wide network of stakeholders committed to improving public transport links in northern Devon.

Barnstaple's Mayor Janet Coates reflected on the rapid development since the alliance was formed. She highlighted that the Tarka Line's modernisation has been mentioned in strategic planning documents including the draft Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan for 2025 to 2040, and the Peninsula Transport Strategic Implementation Plan.

"This work aligns with proposals raised during a Westminster Hall debate in December," she said. "Work is continuing to finalise business cases for investment for adoption by official bodies. We at Barnstaple Town Council are proud to be one of the stakeholders in this important organisation" reports [Devon Live](#).

North Devon MP, Ian Roome, has drawn attention to the significant increase in passenger numbers on the Tarka Line, describing them as "staggering" and indicative of the pressing need for enhancement.

"The case for the enhancement of our cherished branch line has not been stronger in my lifetime," Ian said. "The rolling stock is one side of the coin. But it is the cold, hard data of passenger numbers that will drive decision making".

Roome confirmed that discussions with Great Western Railway (GWR) and government representatives have been encouraging, but that regional advocacy must remain robust to ensure North Devon's needs are prioritised in national infrastructure funding decisions.

Andrea Davis, Devon County Council's cabinet member for climate change, environment and transport, reiterated the council's support for the Bideford line reinstatement. She confirmed that the authority remains committed to lobbying for improvements to the Tarka Line as a foundational step toward broader rail development.

Andrea, who recently met with rail minister Lord Peter Hendy, praised Devon County Council for its proactive approach to rail improvements. "Devon County Council continues to be one of the most proactive authorities regarding rail. Our success is very much down to the way we work in partnership and the support we enjoy from organisations who share our positions" she said.

She pointed to the successful reopening of the Dartmoor Line, which now includes Okehampton Interchange, as proof of the county's ability to deliver significant infrastructure upgrades when backed by government support.

Meanwhile, Mark Hopwood, managing director of Great Western Railway, gave a comprehensive review of both achievements and ongoing issues on the North Devon line. He highlighted that the Tarka Line is one of the best performing in terms of post-pandemic passenger growth, but acknowledged that reliability and capacity constraints are still problematic.

"Capacity on the line is a challenge, particularly on some of the morning and late afternoon trains," Mark admitted. "We're working to introduce recently refurbished trains and are progressing with Project Churchward to replace all remaining diesel trains".

He stressed the need for solid data and clear evidence to back up business cases for future investment, especially as GWR and Network Rail evaluate competing demands across their regions.

Andrew Robinson, Network Rail's senior strategic planner, has shed light on the preliminary work being carried out to assess potential improvements to rail infrastructure. These include plans to reintroduce double tracking at the southern end of the route, establish new passing loops at the northern end, modernise outdated level crossings and signalling systems.

He confirmed that design teams are currently pinpointing feasible locations for passing loops and junctions, as well as identifying potential risks linked to increased service frequency and speed.

"The aim is to enable a two trains per hour service and achieve journey times of under one hour," Andrew stated. "We need to look at how we can operate the line more efficiently and provide the flexibility and resilience it will require to meet future service levels."

While acknowledging that some interventions would require time and significant investment, he also noted that other measures could be implemented sooner to improve the passenger experience in the meantime.

Peter West, a strategic advisor to the NDRDA, highlighted that the Tarka Line has seen better post-pandemic ridership than many other lines across the country. He emphasised the crucial role of intermediate stations in the route's overall performance and called for ongoing focus on strategic business case development.

Roger Blake, the acting convener, addressed the intricacies of the planning process, stating that understanding why the improvements are necessary is the first step towards gaining support from national authorities. "There is physical work happening now and scheme development is progressing," he said.

"But we must continue to demonstrate the case for change before entering detailed delivery planning."

Ian Baxter, strategic director at SLC Rail, shared insights from demand modelling and business case development work. He revealed that even without housing growth, reopening the Bideford line could attract up to 300,000 new passengers per year, with 80% of those users being 'new to rail'.

"If we include projected housing growth from the local plan, the figure increases to 450,000 passengers annually," Ian stated. "The economic case becomes much stronger, particularly when wider benefits such as reduced car dependency and improved access to employment are considered."

He also mentioned that the capital cost for the project could range between £305 million and over £500 million depending on whether flood defence work is included. Despite the economic case meeting or exceeding Department for Transport thresholds under some scenarios, he warned that the current public funding climate remains challenging.

Daniel Burke, representing Navantia UK / Harland and Wolff Appledore Shipyard, has emphasised the pressing need for better transport links from a private sector viewpoint. He pointed out that forthcoming defence and green energy projects could bring 5,000 jobs to the region, but poor connectivity could restrict access to these opportunities.

"Workers and apprentices cannot rely on existing public transport to meet shift or education schedules," Daniel stated. "There is funding available from strategic investors such as the Crown Estate - but they are waiting for Devon to demonstrate what infrastructure is required to unlock growth."

His comments highlighted the importance of integrated transport planning not just as a public service issue, but also as a catalyst for economic development and private investment.

As the NDRDA enters its third year, there's a clear consensus among stakeholders: significant progress has been made, but there's still a lot to do. Finalising business cases, securing funding, and gaining political support will be crucial in turning the aspirations of regional rail connectivity into a reality.

Meanwhile, work on the ground continues. Design and planning efforts are progressing, and evidence continues to be collected to support a strong case for North Devon's future rail network.

Unpublished Reach Publishing Services Limited picture credit of Yeoford station, where the two tracks passing through the station are actually independent single lines, with the one running through the disused (former northbound) platform used for Okehampton line trains, including stone traffic from the Aggregate Industries quarry at Meldon. The Tarka Line trains utilise what used to be the Exeter (southbound) platform in both directions, with the two lines connecting further south at Crediton.

Unpublished NDRDA footnote – NDRDA partners and stakeholders at 23rd April:

Great Western Railway, Network Rail

County Council - Devon

District Councils - Mid-Devon, North Devon, Torridge

Town Councils - Barnstaple, Bideford, Northam

Parish Councils - Burrington, Chawleigh, Chittlehamholt Satterleigh & Warkleigh, Chulmleigh, King's Nympton, Lapford

Sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport, Peninsula Rail Task Force

Petroc College

Navantia UK (Harland & Wolff, Appledore)

South West Business Council

Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership, TravelWatch SouthWest, Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station, North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group (formerly Tarka Rail Association), Railfuture