

Presentation to Torridge District Council's External Overview and Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday

7th January 2026 by Roger Blake, national Infrastructure & Networks Director for Railfuture Ltd, a founder member of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance - he is its Acting Convener

“The External Overview & Scrutiny Committee will exercise its functions in respect of the performance of partners and external Public Sector bodies and Council services with an “outward-facing” emphasis on the area of Torridge and its inhabitants.”

Our journey so far

2021

- # March – DfT commits to fund Dartmoor Line, Bideford Railway Heritage Centre (BRHC) return original insignia from ‘Bideford’ locomotive to the town.
- # May – BRHC then-Director Tim Steer contacts Railfuture about reopening Bideford-Barnstaple.
- # December – BRHC host a reception at Bideford station for West Devon Cllr Kevin Ball from the successful OkeRail campaign and Roger Blake from Railfuture.

2022

- # June – Torridge DC motion to support rail extension, embed in new joint Local Plan and in Economic Development Business Plan.
- # July – TDC / NDDC JPPC – resolve for rail link to be considered as part of People & Place.

2023

- # December – Bideford TC first founder of Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA), then Railfuture and former Tarka Rail Association.
- # December – TDC Strategic Plan 2024-29, ‘Local economy / actions’ to “Investigate appetite to jointly commission and fund study to evaluate economic / environmental benefits and impacts.”

2024

- # January – TDC UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan 2024/25, Bideford railway study to be one of three feasibility studies.
- # March – Inaugural NDRDA annual Convention, Torridge / Bideford.
- # March – bid to GWR Customer & Community Improvement Fund (CCIF).
- # April – TDC to join NDRDA.
- # April – SLC Rail appointed, assess economic dimension to preliminary strategic business case.
- # May – GWR CCIF bid unsuccessful, alternative match-funding sources necessary.
- # July – NDRDA stakeholder representatives’ workshop on early business case development.
- # July – Network Rail ‘Connecting Communities’ - Bideford one of two Case Studies in Devon.
- # July – TDC / NDDC Economic Strategy 2024-29.
- # July – TDC C&R Committee confirm to join NDRDA.
- # September – TDC Bideford Cultural Strategy notes transport weaknesses

2025

- # March – second NDRDA annual Convention, North Devon / Barnstaple
- # May – Peninsula Transport published Strategic Implementation Plan 2025-50 + Delivery Plan.
- # July – Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority approved Local Transport Plan 4, 2025-40.
- # September – study funders representatives’ workshop, business case development / SLC Rail.
- # November – Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority approved Corporate Plan 2025-35.
- # December – TDC / NDDC adopted Northern Devon Place Story.

Full diary here: [Railfuture | Bideford and Barnstaple to Exeter diary](#)

Where we are now

Assessing the strategic case for change, and for investing in a fixed link for Bideford-Barnstaple-Exeter passenger rail services – ‘why?’ before ‘how?’ – many more questions than answers.

Achievement of project requires adherence to process, and DfT’s March 2018 industry-agreed Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP) is that process. It has five Decision points, each preceding one of five stages, the first three of which progress to a different level of business case - Strategic Outline (SOBC), Outline (OBC), Full (FBC):

- ~ Decision to Initiate > Determine (SOBC) >
- ~ Decision to Develop > Develop (OBC) >
- ~ Decision to Design > Design (FBC) >
- ~ Decision to Deliver > Deliver >
- ~ Decision to Accept > Deploy.

The three formal business cases required – Strategic Outline, Outline, Full – each have five ‘dimensions’: strategic, economic, commercial, financial, management. For indicative scale of cost the SOBC is a 5/6-figure sum, the OBC a 6/7-figure sum, the FBC a 7/8-figure sum.

Where is Bideford-Barnstaple in there?

Preparing official transport authorities - Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority (from April 2026), Network Rail and the DfT - for a Decision to Initiate, and proceed to Determine the nature of the issue, the outcomes sought, and the viability of the idea by commissioning a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC).

That preparation comprises what is being termed a Preliminary Strategic Business Case (P-SBC), drafted pro bono by NDRDA independent adviser Peter West OBE, structured to comprise the required five dimensions. It is supplemented by the economic dimension (in turn partly informed by an initial engineering feasibility review) in the form of an independent specialist appraisal produced by SLC Rail which was part-funded through Torridge District Council’s UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation. Both reports are to be read in conjunction with this introductory report.

For comparison, Network Rail’s Wales & Western Region’s “*Connecting Communities – framework assessment of new station opportunities on Western Route*” - first published in July 2024 and reissued with corrections in November 2024 - used Bideford as one of five case studies. One of the other four was also in Devon, for Plympton on the east side of Plymouth and on the existing main line; the other three case studies were in Gloucestershire and Wiltshire.

A settlement or population cluster was included in the assessment where the total population within a connected settlement cluster living more than 5 kilometres / 3 miles away from a railway station was greater than 10,000 people. The largest population clusters greater than 5 km / 3 m from a railway station were assessed against categories resulting in a score for ‘strategic case’ and ‘likely complexity’. The generic term ‘Feasibility’ was considered under those two principal categories, the first focused on the strategic case for connection to the network, the second on the likely complexity of connection – in terms of provision of both required infrastructure and a train service.

Of the 29 stations identified meeting the criteria of population cluster size and distance from a station, six were set aside as having been subject to prior separate and detailed study. Of the core 23 potential station locations assessed, Bideford ranked 2nd equal for ‘strategic fit’ with a Wiltshire case study (top-ranked was Plympton) and 5th overall after the ‘likely complexity’ of making a connection to the network at Barnstaple was factored-in.

These **Key Points** are highlighted in the Executive Summary of the P-SBC:

- Very weak socio-economic conditions and transport peripherality in Northern Devon are key problems reinstating train services connecting Bideford with Exeter and beyond can help solve;
- Strong post-pandemic passenger growth on the existing Exeter to Barnstaple rail route and elsewhere in the South West: Northern Devon is a place for confidence in rail investment;
- The likely level of capital cost and project timescales are realistic aspirations for Devon;
- All trains to run direct between Bideford and Exeter Central in typically 86 minutes, with a journey time of 15 minutes Bideford to Barnstaple: competitive with car journeys;
- Strong synergy with separate, complementary schemes to:
 - Replace GWR's older fleet of diesel multiple unit trains with modern, faster accelerating, more reliable, higher capacity, more comfortable, more environmentally friendly trains; and
 - Modernise the Exeter to Barnstaple line, with the potential to materially reduce Bideford to Exeter journey times, increase frequency to two trains per hour and improve performance;
- Reinstatement of train services has high social, connectivity and sustainability value, supporting regional growth and development, sustainable transport and tourism in Northern Devon;
- The economic case is highly sensitive to scheme costs, improved journey time on the existing route between Exeter and Barnstaple and assumptions on housing development in the area;
- A core scenario, using mid-range capital costs and current train service levels, results in a BCR of 0.23 ... "Sensitivity tests demonstrate that with a certain combination of future assumptions the scheme could achieve a BCR of around 2.0";
- Capital costs could be in an envelope between £305 million and £539 million;
- A substantial level of usage of Bideford station is likely: 343,000 p.a. (lower than Barnstaple, but higher than Okehampton), placing it 1,000 out of c.2,960 stations nationally;
- 83% of trips new to rail, with low levels of abstraction from Barnstaple and Umberleigh; and
- Subject to further development work, at this stage, the preferred route is a modified version of the original coastal alignment, with retention/improvement of the Tarka Trail as a key objective.

Problems which reinstating train services to Bideford can help solve:

- A. Very weak socio-economic conditions in Northern Devon
- B. The physical peripherality of Northern Devon inhibits the development of stronger areas of the local economy
- C. Long journey times for all transport modes result in physical peripherality
- D. More sustainable transport modes have a low market share for travel within and to / from Northern Devon

Objectives to be met are identified as:

1. Improve socio-economic conditions in the Bideford and wider Torridge areas by reducing the negative impacts of peripherality, assisting in lifting productivity, prosperity and local economic growth;
2. Add low-carbon capacity, choice, resilience and reliability to the area's transport network to contribute towards decarbonising transport on the Torridge / North Devon - Exeter corridor;
3. Enable rail and more sustainable active and public transport modes to take an increased share of overall transport demand, supporting and mitigating the impacts of current and expected future demand growth, including where driven by increasing local population and planned housing expansion;
4. Enhance access to employment opportunities, education and healthcare in Exeter and beyond for Bideford and Torridge residents and facilitate access to 'hard-to-recruit' jobs in Bideford and Torridge for people outside these areas; and
5. Improve visitor access by sustainable public transport to the natural environment, including the Tarka Trail, the South West Coast Path, the North Devon National Landscape, the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere and other coastal areas.

There are five **Conclusions** from SLC Rail's Economic Appraisal and Engineering Feasibility review:

- 1) The railway reinstatement has high social and connectivity value, supporting regional development, sustainable transport and tourism in North Devon.
- 2) The economic case is highly sensitive to scheme costs, service quality, improved journey time / frequency between Exeter and Barnstaple and assumptions on housing development in the area.
- 3) The railway scheme should not bear the full cost of coastal defence works and further exploration is needed with other agencies to understand the apportionment of capital costs.
- 4) Enhanced services - i.e. increased train frequency and faster journey times between Barnstaple and Exeter - are essential to unlocking suppressed passenger demand and improving the scheme's economic value-for-money.
- 5) An upgraded Exeter-Barnstaple line would potentially allow the Bideford extension to be delivered operationally with only mileage-related costs borne by the scheme.

There then follow five **Recommendations**:

- **ONE - Refine Capital Costs:** More detailed engineering assessments, particularly of flood mitigation and structural reuse, are needed to reduce uncertainty of cost estimates.
- **TWO - Stakeholder Engagement:** Early discussions with the Environment Agency, local councils, and active travel groups are essential to understand flood defence requirements and balance rail and trail users' needs.
- **THREE - Better Understanding of Additional Revenue Streams:** Consider additional revenue streams e.g. parking, any dependent development, and how rail can play a role in attracting new leisure visitors to the area. This would have a positive impact on the demand/revenue and ultimately the BCR.
- **FOUR - Housing Growth:** The Local Plan and the additional development requirements through the new mandatory housing targets should recognise the role of the railway in helping to make this development sustainable.
- **FIVE - Phased Investment:** Consider early-stage investment in route protection, environmental studies, and service upgrades between Barnstaple and Exeter to improve the baseline attractiveness of the scheme.

Benefit-Cost Ratios

For background, the *Green Book Review 2025: Findings and actions* from HM Treasury in June 2025 put increased emphasis on the strategic case. It concluded that there is "continued over-emphasis on BCRs in decision making" and that many "business cases typically answer the question "what is the best way to undertake this project?" rather than "what is the right project to improve growth in this area?" This is summarised as: "Insufficient emphasis on place-based objectives."

With no housing growth, the combination of a low-cost scheme, a half-hourly service frequency and a 30-minute journey time reduction would be needed to achieve a positive if modest BCR of 1.28.

Housing growth is however assured so even a higher, medium-cost scheme with a half-hourly service frequency and 30-minute journey time reduction would almost double that BCR to 2.38.

Housing growth with any one of four of the six low-cost scheme scenarios i.e. where the railway bears only a minimal contribution to the cost of estuarine flood protection, generate a positive BCR.

Concluding summary

Strong policy backing at many levels:

Torridge District Council – June 2022 Motion, December 2023 Strategic Plan 2024-29, January 2024 UKSPF for feasibility study, April + July 2024 join NDRDA, September 2024 Bideford Cultural Strategy

joint Torridge / North Devon District Councils – July 2022 JPPC People & Place to include rail link, July 2024 Economic Strategy 2024-29

Network Rail Western Route – July / November 2024 new stations assessment

Devon County Council – March 2025 Local Transport Plan 2025-40

Sub-national Peninsula Transport – May 2025 Strategic Implementation Plan Delivery Plan 2025-50

Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority – July 2025 Local Transport Plan 2025-40

Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority – November 2025 Corporate Plan 2025-35

Northern Devon Futures – Northern Devon Place Story 2025

What else is happening?

Both the fifth Conclusion and the fifth Recommendation from the SLC Rail report are clear that optimising the success of extending train services to Bideford via Barnstaple is very closely related to optimising the performance of existing services between Barnstaple and Exeter. That means a step-change in the capacity, journey-times and frequency of those services, and a concurrent workstream is being undertaken by Network Rail in collaboration with GWR and representatives of the NDRDA to identify options for funders.

A combination of urgency and ambition is also driving a more expansive and coherent network-wide approach, led by Devon County Council as the current transport authority. The proposals in the new Local Transport Plan for Barnstaple services to extend across Exeter to Digby & Sowton including a new station at Monkerton, and the new town for Marlcombe in East Devon, all serve to highlight the necessity for a holistic approach which recognises the reciprocal value of improved rail services for Barnstaple and new rail services for Bideford for the wider existing rail transport network.

What next?

NDRDA third annual Convention, Mid-Devon / Eggesford – invitations distributed – March 2026

Devon & Torbay Combined County Authority – become the single transport authority – April 2026

The next step for a Bideford rail services extension scheme will probably mean the first formal stage which means a Strategic Outline Business Case to be taken forward under the auspices of a new funding sponsor. Partners and stakeholders working within the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance will continue to pursue development of the necessary business cases to underpin the justification for investment in urgently-required additional capacity, connectivity and travel choice to support the planned sustainable growth in homes and jobs across northern Devon's broad catchment of the Greater Bideford-Barnstaple corridor.