

Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

Modernising the North Devon (Tarka) Line - fit for the 21st Century



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Extending North Devon Line services - reconnecting Bideford

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Torrige and North Devon Joint Planning Policy Committee Friday 24th April 2026

Chair, Vice-Chair, elected members – good morning. I'm Roger Blake, Infrastructure Director for Railfuture and Acting Convener for the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, founded in December '23.

Thank-you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you, for the first time since the 15th July '22 meeting of this committee, quote, "RESOLVED that the Bideford to Barnstaple rail link is considered as part of the People and Place project."

Five years ago DfT approved funding for reinstatement of Dartmoor Line services, and Bideford Railway Heritage Centre restored to the town the insignia for the loco named Bideford. My national organisation was then contacted by local people interested in exploring prospects for reinstatement of train services for this town. That's what brought this Man of Kent to Bideford in December '21, still living in London for now 43 years, 30 working as a town later transport planner with a London Borough working through Local Plans, Local Transport Implementation Plans, a Transport & Works Act Order application for a new rail link, and as another economic enabler a partly S.106-funded station in a neighbouring Borough which reopened a decade ago.

You and the Alliance are immersed in heavily-prescribed processes and, unlike yourselves here today, despite talking about a potential railway we don't have a timetable, but we do have a scheme development programme. We share a common destination – the ultimate scrutiny of independent examinations by the Planning Inspectorate, either of a draft North Devon & Torrige Local Plan in '28-'29 or, some years later yet likely within the Local Plan period, potentially an application for a Development Consent Order (DCO).

We each have to work through a sequence of processes to present evidence and test assumptions before reaching any conclusions, rather than speculation, about a product. Your timetable prescribes gateways, the Alliance's programme is defined by Treasury / DfT stages in the Rail Network

Enhancements Pipeline. The Alliance has barely begun its journey, so far publishing a Preliminary Strategic Business Case which I reported to Torridge's External Overview & Scrutiny Committee here on 1st April. The next stage must be a formal Strategic Outline Business Case, yet subject to funding, ideally by 29 March '28 to align with the Local Plan timetable and give appropriate expression to this Committee's July '22 Resolution. Government approval of the SOBC is required before the next stage, an Outline Business Case, only after which are detailed engineering design questions addressed, in preparation for the DCO application.

A new rail link might, repeat might, be under construction around a half-century after the North Devon Link Road, the Torridge Bridge and the Tarka Trail were under construction, so there's no over-stating the significance of such a potential infrastructure intervention. That's the mediating role of the Alliance, a collaboration now comprising around four dozen partner and stakeholder organisations, bringing together into a shared and maturing conversation representatives of interested and affected parties with no commitment to anything other than the gathering and testing of evidence and options against addressing problems and meeting objectives.

Thank-you.