

A NEW TRAIN SERVICE CONNECTING BIDEFORD WITH EXETER AND BEYOND

Preliminary Strategic Business Case
Version Including Only the Executive Summary



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On behalf of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

Incorporating key findings from the report *Bideford to Barnstaple Line Reopening Engineering Feasibility and Economic Appraisal* prepared by SLC Rail in August 2025

Version 4 (27 April 2026) – compared to version 3, including reference to the Network Rail *Connecting Communities* report

REVISION AND COMMENTS

Version 4: author Peter West 27 April 2026: compared to version 3, including reference to the Network Rail *Connecting Communities* report

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Incorporating key findings from the report *Bideford to Barnstaple Line Reopening Engineering Feasibility and Economic Appraisal* prepared by SLC Rail in August 2025

This version includes only the Executive Summary. Readers requiring more information should read the full Five-Case Preliminary Strategic Business Case.

Disclaimer

The author of this document cannot vouch for the correctness of third party sources quoted, but has put particular emphasis on official statistics such as those from the Office for National Statistics, local authorities and the Office of Rail & Road. Conclusions drawn in the document are explained and are based on a cautious, sober assessment of options and contextual information. Such conclusions at the early stage of development of this document are necessarily provisional and it is recognised that other legitimate conclusions could be drawn. The document has been produced to aid decision-making at a local and regional level and is intended for that purpose alone. It is the start of the analytical approach to decision-making through the various stages of business case described in the Introduction below, not its conclusion. The views expressed in this document are those of the author alone, even where comments have been accepted from other parties, and do not purport to represent the views of the members of the Northern Devon Rail Development Alliance, whether individually or as a group nor Network Rail or Great Western Railway as corporate entities.

Executive Summary

Key points

- 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 Central¹ 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 area²;
- 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;
- 89% 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.

Strong post-pandemic growth – Northern Devon is a place for confidence in rail investment

Given that Devon County Council has a successful record in promoting improvements to the rail network and given that train services in Devon and the South West continue to be well used and are growing even after the COVID pandemic, with the Exeter-Barnstaple route in particular substantially above the best pre-pandemic passenger numbers, Devon, Torridge and North Devon should be seen as places in which there should be confidence in investing in rail.

Within that wider context, this document concludes, at an early stage of business case development and through a cautious, sober assessment of the factors involved, including SLC Rail's early stage professional engineering and economic study, that the aspiration for passenger train services to be reintroduced to Bideford is sufficiently realistic and is of sufficient potential to help address the material local socio-economic and transport-related issues to justify further work being undertaken. This would involve decisions on who should sponsor business case work going forward and on whether to progress the development of a full Strategic Outline Business Case.

The problems reinstating train services to Bideford can help solve

Very weak socio-economic conditions in Northern Devon: Bideford, nearby urban areas and the wider Torridge district register unusually poorly on a wide range of socio-economic indicators. The trend towards the centralisation and specialisation of services and facilities means that many people need to travel to Exeter and beyond for work, education, health care, leisure and other purposes, even with countervailing initiatives to maintain local self-containment.

¹ Potentially, as now, some early and late trains may only directly serve Exeter St Davids.

² *Bideford to Barnstaple Line Reopening Engineering Feasibility and Economic Appraisal Executive - Executive Summary*, SLC Rail, August 2025 – also for the BCR and capital costs quoted here.

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PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY-ONLY VERSION

The physical peripherality of Northern Devon inhibits the development of stronger areas of the local economy: The local economy has strengths in the growing sectors of defence, renewable energy, tourism and other fields. Key employers report that weaknesses in transport provision make it harder to recruit permanent staff. ‘Hard-to-recruit’ specialists such as sub-contractors from other parts of the country need to travel inwards to support these developing areas of the economy.

Long journey times for all transport modes result in physical peripherality: Bideford and other places in Torridge are poorly connected by all transport modes with Exeter and beyond. Car journeys are long and slow and suffer from congestion, in particular in Exeter and Barnstaple. Public transport journeys are longer and slower still, with slow, infrequent through bus services to/from Exeter. Combined bus-rail journeys are made uncompetitive with car by slow local road conditions and the interchange between bus and train at Barnstaple.

More sustainable transport modes have a low market share for travel within and to/from Northern Devon: Current transport provision is not a suitable basis for sustainable future growth and development. Car travel has a very high share of the local travel market. Restoring train services would allow more sustainable train, bus and active travel modes to take a higher share of the travel market. While restoration of train services cannot solve all the problems and issues experienced in an area alone, putting a town and its surrounding areas back on the national rail map can play an important part in addressing those issues.

Materially shorter journey times a key feature of the proposed reinstated train service

Key features of the train service reviewed in this document include:

- A journey time of 15 minutes between Bideford and Barnstaple;
- All trains run direct between Bideford and Exeter, with a typical through journey time between Bideford and Exeter St Davids of 81 minutes (Exeter Central typically 86 minutes³);
- Those journey times would be significantly better than any bus or bus-rail intermodal journey and would be competitive with car journey times, in particular with road congestion in the Exeter and Barnstaple areas;
- A separate, complementary investment scheme to modernise the existing Exeter to Barnstaple rail route could materially further improve the Bideford train journey time and could also substantially improve punctuality and reliability;
- A considerably longer turn-round time at Bideford compared to Barnstaple would give recovery time for delayed trains and substantially help to improve punctuality on the existing Exeter to Barnstaple route which suffers from poor operational performance and exports delay to other parts of the network such as the longer distance routes to London and the North;
- Additional station[s] between Bideford and Barnstaple to be confirmed (Instow assumed);
- Trains would need to be longer than currently to ensure sufficient capacity both for growth on the Barnstaple-Exeter route and for additional passengers from the Bideford extension; and
- No specific class of train is specified at this stage, but the direction of rolling stock development means a battery or other alternative powered train could be used, limiting noise and local emissions and avoiding the visual intrusion and high capital cost of overhead wires and masts.

A modified coastal route the preferred infrastructure option

This train service is supported by the preferred option for infrastructure, which together appear to be the best fit with local, regional and national plans and strategies:

- Reinstatement of the original coastal rail alignment, with a local deviation at Fremington Quay, with the SLC Report⁴ identifying costs in an envelope between £305 million and £539 million;
- Retention and improvement of the Tarka Trail as a central, integral feature of the scheme;
- Sustainability a key objective throughout, including protection of and continued public access to the environmentally sensitive areas the route runs through;
- Options around intermediate stations at Instow and potential further intermediate station[s] at Yelland or Fremington;

³ Some trains run in as little as 4 minutes between Exeter St Davids and Exeter Central, some take a little longer at 6, 7 or 8 minutes, with a few taking longer still. A few early trains to Barnstaple and a few late trains from Barnstaple start or terminate at Exeter St Davids. See the GWR timetable in Annex C.

⁴ *Bideford to Barnstaple Line Reopening Engineering Feasibility and Economic Appraisal Executive*, SLC Rail, August 2025.

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PRELIMINARY STRATEGIC BUSINESS CASE – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY-ONLY VERSION

- Recognition of the importance of connectivity with bus services at the Bideford station site, together with active travel improvements; and
- Options for possible future train service frequency improvements.

A shorter inland rail route is not the preferred option at this stage of development:

- Extremely high construction costs for either inland route option through challenging terrain;
- Much or all of the journey time gain from the shorter route would be lost through operational solutions to the junction for an inland route being south of Barnstaple station – which would also increase operating cost and impose operational performance risks;
- Bideford station would either need to be at an out-of-town park & ride site or a more difficult, slower approach to the original station site would need to be made; and
- While Barnstaple is unlikely to be the dominant passenger flow from Bideford, an inland route means there would be no direct train service between the two towns.

A light rail option is not favoured at this stage:

- It has high costs but does not achieve the journey time benefits of avoiding interchange at Barnstaple and therefore does not address the key objective of tackling peripherality; and
- A light rail system for the wider corridor across Northern Devon would address other objectives and could potentially use a reinstated heavy rail line to Bideford as part of its route.

Objectives

The following are proposed, aligning with and pursuing local, regional and national strategies:

- 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 UNESCO North Devon Biosphere and other coastal areas.