

Big plans for North Devon rail as The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance is launched

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance has been launched today, with the aim of securing a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple and upgrade of the North Devon (Tarka) Line between Exeter and Barnstaple.

Thirty representatives from 13 stakeholder organisations came together to commit jointly to build on local council resolutions already passed and funding already committed to develop a compelling case to be put to government to support the reconnection of the long-marginalised Torridge community of over 40,000 people.

Torridge & West Devon MP the Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC said in a statement *“You are embarking on a very worthwhile cause. There is substantial support in Torridge for exploring the viability and economic case for this important railway connection to Barnstaple. Housing and population growth are likely to require improved communication links in the future. Such a link would no doubt require the upgrading of the line between Barnstaple and Exeter, and that too would have incalculable benefits for Torridge.”*

North Devon MP Selaine Saxby, like Sir Geoffrey unable to be present, also issued a statement saying *“I wholeheartedly support the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance’s ambition to restore the rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple, and to upgrade the existing Tarka Line between Barnstaple and Exeter. The proposal to re-establish the old railway line between Barnstaple and Bideford, although not necessarily a replica of the former route, would be a huge advantage for locals and tourists alike.”*

Devon County Council’s Andrea Davis, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport added *“Devon County Council and Peninsula Transport are committed to decarbonising the transport system, improving connectivity and giving genuine transport choice for our residents, visitors and businesses. In Devon we have a track record for re-opening rail links, opening stations and integrating transport modes. Improving connectivity for residents in Northern Devon, supporting new development with transport infrastructure and creating healthy, connected communities for the future is key to our future wellbeing and prosperity.”*

The new Alliance’s statement of purpose is **“To secure a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple and upgrade of the North Devon (Tarka) Line between Exeter and Barnstaple, championing their transformational benefits for communities and businesses and advocating to decision-makers the economic, social and environmental case for developing and investing in the project.”**

60 years ago these communities lost their rail lifeline and have struggled economically ever since. Charles Kingsley wrote ‘Westward Ho!’ there, Rudyard Kipling was schooled there, Winston Churchill and Dwight D. Eisenhower met there, it’s home to the annual Appledore Book Festival, and 170 years since its foundation Appledore shipyard now witnesses Harland & Wolff continuing ship building there.

Three years ago the town welcomed the return of the original name and number plates from steam locomotive ‘Bideford’ with the Town’s then Mayor quipping that what he really wanted was the return of the town’s railway! The local Tarka Rail Association with its ‘ACE Rail’ campaign supported by national lobby group Railfuture have since been developing local support for just that, culminating in the formation of the new Alliance.

Closed to passengers in 1965, the line between Barnstaple and Torrington clung on to life thanks to milk traffic from Torrington and ball clay traffic from Meeth – the 1874 London and South Western Railway signal box at Instow remaining in use because of the adjacent level crossing. All but four semaphore signals were also removed. In 1979 the level crossing gates were replaced by automatic barriers and the signals were removed. Just three years later, freight traffic ceased on the line and Instow box came under threat of demolition. However, campaigners managed to get the box grade II listed – thwarting any demolition attempt and it is now open to visitors on selected days.

The first Bideford railway station was opened on 2 November 1855 as the terminus of the Bideford Extension Railway from Barnstaple. This was taken over by the London and South Western Railway about ten years later. This station was re-sited in 1872 when the line was extended to Torrington.

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