

Bideford/Barnstaple rail link backed

By Alison Stephenson, local democracy reporter



Could North Devon get more trains? (image courtesy: MDDC)

Hopes for an extended Tarka Line too

Torrige councillors have joined a new alliance dedicated to reinstating the rail link from Bideford to Barnstaple.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance is backed by local Conservative MPs Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torrige and West Devon) and Selaine Saxby (North Devon).

The group also wants to upgrade the Tarka Line connecting Exeter to Barnstaple.

Torrige councillor Peter Hames (Green, Appledore) asked the council to support his motion to join the alliance as it had previously supported the revival of the rail link.

Last year the council adopted its new strategic plan which included investigating whether it should jointly commission a study looking into the impact and benefit of the line.

CLlr Hames said the railway would result in less car use, better air quality and mitigate against climate change.

Speaking at the full council meeting, Tim Steer from the alliance said the greater Bideford area was struggling and is one of the nation's poorest areas.

He said improving public transport should be a key consideration for the Torrige Place Board which is driving projects for £20 million of Levelling Up funding for the district.

He added that the area is one of the worst congested because 40 per cent of people travelling outside the district to work.

Long-serving councillor David Brenton (Lab, Bideford South) said he would like to see the railway opened in his lifetime, and that a study in 1999 showed that it was feasible.

"It's such a beautiful line, it would not lose money. I know it's on the government's list, but it is quite far back [and] a partnership like the alliance could push it up."

Council leader [sic] Doug Bushby (Ind, Bideford North) said they would love to see the railway reopened but it would cost “hundreds of millions” and was outside the realm of the district council.

“The government would be funding this,” he said.

Torrige and West Devon MP Sir Geoffrey Cox said there is substantial support in Torrige for exploring the economic case for a railway connection to Barnstaple.

“Housing and population growth are likely to require improved communication links in the future,” he said.

Thirty representatives for 13 stakeholder organisations attended the launch of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance at Bideford’s Royal Hotel.

The alliance will lobby the government for support for the new rail link and improvements.

A rail connection between Bideford and Barnstaple topped the wish-list for residents when Torrige District Council asked them for priorities to shape the strategic plan.