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On track for a prosperous future with new rail alliance



Photo: Lewis Clarke

» Persistence and collaboration key to success of line and economic growth for North Devon. [See Page 3](#)

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Rail line is most successful for GWR and alliance can help aid growth

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THE launch of the North Devon Rail Alliance has marked a significant step forward in the dream of reconnecting Bideford to Barnstaple by rail.

Backed by prominent local authorities and figures, the alliance aims to restore the missing link and upgrade the existing Tarka Line between Barnstaple and Exeter.

Speaking at the launch event at the Royal Hotel Bideford, Mayor Jamie Mackenzie said he sees the project as a catalyst for regeneration.

"It will have a great effect on Bideford," he added. "It's going to have a regenerative economic effect. We're an area of deprivation, and I think this project will help the future of Bideford, give us hope and prosperity, and connect us back to the rest of the world."

Barnstaple Mayor Louisa York echoed the enthusiasm, highlighting the project's alignment with the town council's strategic goals: "This is an exciting opportunity to put North Devon back on the map," she

said. "In January, Barnstaple Town Council voted to be part of this opportunity... This is a golden opportunity to transform our transport network."

Local MPs Geoffrey Cox and Selaine Saxby have pledged support for the initiative. Mr Cox, acknowledged "substantial support in Torrridge", emphasising the need for a feasibility study.

Ms Saxby pointed to the potential for reducing road congestion, boosting tourism, and creating new educational and employment opportunities.

Matt Barnes, head of strategic service development for Great Western Railway, shared the optimism.

"North Devon is a fantastic success story for the railway. Twenty years ago, the Tarka Line was a quiet rural line, but after the council funded some service enhancements, we saw the line grow between Barnstaple and Exeter, and we've seen that again over the last five years. So much so, it's the most successful line on our network regarding growth post-Covid, and arguably the whole country. We are over 20 per cent, closing 30 per cent above pre-Covid.

"There are real reasons for hope, and a big focus has to be on how we carry on that development growth of the North Devon line.

"It'll be a long road to get the North Devon line to where we believe it could be," he said. "It'll probably be an even longer road to make Bideford happen, but that doesn't mean it's not worth it."

Network Rail representatives offered guidance and support. Mike Smith, program director for the Restoring Your Railway program, emphasised collaboration.

Marcus Jones, route director for the Western Route at Network Rail, acknowledged the bureaucratic hurdles but encouraged persistence saying: "You're going to get told 'no' a lot," he said. "Ignore it. Projects like this are fantastic things that can be achieved, and I see we can do it."

Tom Hart, the former general manager at Appledore Shipyard, who is now setting up the yard for a major contract beginning next year, said transport was an issue they had faced recruiting people over the last year. He also highlighted the need for a rail connection for students in the area.

again we decided to carry out a better scheme, giving the toilets a complete new area. Rather than a rush-job before Easter we wanted to do a proper job and make it more viable."

He said a tender would be chosen for the work after the bank holiday.



» The North Devon Rail Alliance was launched in March



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