

# Calls to bring back historic Devon railway station

Passenger numbers are soaring and pressure is mounting to restore a vital link

By [Lewis Clarke](#)

06:00, 17 APR 2025



**The two tracks passing through the station are actually independent single lines, with the one running through the disused (former northbound) platform used for Okehampton line trains, including stone traffic from the Aggregate Industries quarry at Meldon. The Tarka Line trains utilise what used to be the Exeter (southbound) platform in both directions, with the two lines connecting further south at Crediton.**

The second annual meeting of the North Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA), held in [Barnstaple](#), provided a comprehensive update on the organisation's efforts to modernise the Tarka Line and progress towards the reinstatement of passenger services to [Bideford](#).

The meeting brought together local government representatives, rail industry leaders, and strategic transport planners, each contributing insight into the progress made, challenges encountered, and future priorities for a region whose transport infrastructure is increasingly under strain from rising demand and constrained capacity.

The NDRDA was launched in late 2023 by Bideford Town Council, in partnership with the Tarka Rail Association and Railfuture. Since then, it has rapidly grown to encompass a broad network of stakeholders committed to delivering improved public transport links for northern Devon.

Mayor of Barnstaple Janet Coates reflected on the pace of development since the alliance was formed. She noted that the Tarka Line's modernisation has been referenced in strategic planning documents including the draft Devon and Torbay Local Transport Plan for 2025 to 2040, and the Peninsula Transport Strategic Implementation Plan.



**Andrew Robinson from Network Rail**

“This work aligns with proposals raised during a Westminster Hall debate in December,” she said. “Work is continuing to finalise business cases for investment for adoption by official bodies. We at Barnstaple Town Council are proud to be one of the stakeholders in this important organisation”.

Member of Parliament for [North Devon](#), Ian Roome, highlighted the sharp rise in passenger numbers on the Tarka Line, calling them “staggering” and reflective of the urgent need for enhancement.

“The case for the enhancement of our cherished branch line has not been stronger in my lifetime,” Ian said. “The rolling stock is one side of the coin. But it is the cold, hard data of passenger numbers that will drive decision making”.

Roome confirmed that discussions with Great Western Railway (GWR) and government representatives have been encouraging, but that regional advocacy must remain robust to ensure North Devon’s needs are prioritised in national infrastructure funding decisions.

[Devon County Council](#)’s cabinet member for climate change, environment and transport, Andrea Davis, reaffirmed the council’s support for the Bideford line reinstatement. She confirmed that the authority remains committed to lobbying for improvements to the Tarka Line as a foundational step toward broader rail development.

“I met with the rail minister, Lord Peter Hendy, to discuss this,” Andrea said. “Devon County Council continues to be one of the most proactive authorities regarding rail. Our success is very much down to the way we work in partnership and the support we enjoy from organisations who share our positions”.

She referenced the successful reopening of the [Dartmoor](#) Line, which now includes [Okehampton](#) Interchange, as evidence of the county’s ability to deliver meaningful infrastructure improvements when backed by government support.

Mark Hopwood, managing director of [Great Western Railway](#), provided a detailed assessment of both achievements and persistent challenges on the North Devon line. He said the Tarka Line is one of the best performing in the country in terms of post-pandemic passenger growth, but noted that reliability and capacity constraints remain a concern.



“Capacity on the line is a challenge, particularly on some of the morning and late afternoon trains,” Mark said. “We’re working to introduce recently refurbished trains and are progressing with Project Churchward to replace all remaining diesel trains”.

He emphasised the importance of having robust data and clear evidence to support business cases for future investment, particularly as GWR and [Network Rail](#) assess competing demands across their regions.

Network Rail’s senior strategic planner Andrew Robinson outlined the early-stage work already under way to evaluate infrastructure enhancements. These include reintroducing double tracking at the southern end of the route, establishing new passing loops at the northern end, addressing outdated level crossings, and modernising signalling systems.

He confirmed that design teams are currently assessing feasible locations for passing loops and junctions, as well as potential risks associated with increased service frequency and speed.

“The aim is to enable a two trains per hour service and achieve journey times of under one hour,” Andrew said. “We need to look at how we can operate the line more efficiently and provide the flexibility and resilience it will require to meet future service levels”.

He acknowledged that while some interventions would take time and substantial investment, others could be implemented sooner to enhance the passenger experience in the interim.

Peter West, a strategic advisor to the NDRDA, noted that the Tarka Line has outperformed many others nationwide in terms of post-pandemic ridership. He underscored the importance of intermediate stations to the route’s overall performance and called for continued emphasis on strategic business case development.



### **The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance**

Acting convener Roger Blake addressed the complexity of the planning process, noting that answering the fundamental question—why the improvements are needed—is the first step in securing support from national authorities.

“There is physical work happening now and scheme development is progressing,” he said. “But we must continue to demonstrate the case for change before entering detailed delivery planning”.

Ian Baxter, strategic director at [SLC Rail](#), presented findings from demand modelling and business case development work. He said that even without housing growth, reopening the Bideford line could attract up to 300,000 new passengers per year, with 80% of those users classed as ‘new to rail’.

“If we include projected housing growth from the local plan, the figure increases to 450,000 passengers annually,” Ian said. “The economic case becomes much stronger, particularly when wider benefits such as reduced car dependency and improved access to employment are considered”.

He noted that the capital cost for the project could range between £305 million and over £500 million depending on whether flood defence work is included. While the economic case meets or exceeds Department for Transport thresholds under some scenarios, he cautioned that the current public funding climate remains difficult.

Daniel Burke of Navantia UK / [Harland & Wolff](#) Appledore Shipyard provided a private sector perspective on the urgent need for improved transport links. He highlighted that upcoming defence and green energy projects could bring 5,000 jobs to the region, but poor connectivity threatens to limit access to these opportunities.

“Workers and apprentices cannot rely on existing public transport to meet shift or education schedules,” Daniel said. “There is funding available from strategic investors such as the Crown Estate—but they are waiting for Devon to demonstrate what infrastructure is required to unlock growth”.

His remarks underscored how integrated transport planning must be seen not only as a public service issue but also as an enabler of economic development and private investment.

As the NDRDA enters its third year, the consensus among stakeholders is clear: significant progress has been made, but much remains to be done. Finalising business cases, securing funding, and achieving political backing will be essential in turning the aspirations of regional rail connectivity into operational reality.

In the meantime, work continues on the ground. Design and planning efforts are advancing, and evidence continues to be gathered to support a compelling case for North Devon’s future rail network.

*Unpublished NDRDA footnotes:*

*First picture is of Yeoford station.*

*Third picture includes ACE Rail campaign lead Tim Steer front centre with two Mayors to his right – host Janet Coates for Barnstaple Town Council then Rachel Clarke for Bideford Town Council – plus Chair of Torridge District Council Doug Bushby behind Tim’s right shoulder and Mid-Devon District Council Cabinet member Steve Keable behind his left shoulder. Three other delegates had to leave before the group photo was taken.*