

Bideford Town Council

meeting of the Full Council on Thursday 3rd August 2023

Briefing by the Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail campaign lead, Tim Steer

Good evening Councillors, ladies and gentlemen. I last had the pleasure of addressing you on the subject of restoring rail connectivity for Bideford and Torrridge in my presentation on Thursday 20th January last year. That was when this campaign was in its infancy, since when it has matured and been formally adopted by the Tarka Rail Association both as the Community Rail Partnership and Rail User Group for the existing line, and as the primary advocate for its extension into Torrridge at Bideford. Its success so far has been recognised last year and this in Railfuture's annual national Awards, first for Best New Group (Gold), and then for Best Campaigner (joint Gold), Best Campaign (Bronze) and Best Social Media (Gold).

Thanks to funding from the Association, from Railfuture's Fighting Fund, and from GWR's Customer and Community Improvement Fund, an independent specialist adviser was commissioned by the TRA to produce an Initial Business Case for what we've named the Torrridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme. While the Association's officers are still reflecting in full on the very recently-received IBC (as we call it, for short) I am here at your Mayor's request to share with you an initial summary of some of the report's key findings and recommendations.

For sound strategic planning purposes, the Torrridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme – which is a comprehensive package of short, medium and long-term measures – has to take a roundly 20-year forward view. That happens broadly to coincide with our target of October 2040, as the 75th anniversary of the last scheduled passenger train services for Bideford, as in our judgement a realistically-deliverable target by which time we are aiming to have restored such mainline services. The Programme's strapline is '*Better lives through better journeys*' as our underlying purpose is transformational socio-economic and environmental outcomes for Torrridge and North Devon communities.

It's worth reminding ourselves that we are not about trying to re-create a 19th-century railway, taking out the much-loved Tarka Trail in the process. We are of necessity building a brand new high-performing 21st-century railway fit for the next 100 years and more, through an area and in an era unrecognisable from when the railway first reached Bideford almost 170 years ago – when Queen Victoria was only 18 years into her long reign! Even in those days the railway needed an Act of Parliament to authorise its construction, and in one of life's curious coincidences tomorrow 4th August will mark the exact 170th anniversary of when the Bideford Extension Railway secured its legal powers! Today we shall need a Development Consent Order, which will be overseen by the Planning Inspectorate, an executive agency of the Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities.

While project development work to beat, not just meet, that October 2040 target must start as soon as the next stage of a Department for Transport-compliant Strategic Outline Business Case can be funded, there are other urgently-required steps to improve Bideford's access to the existing rail network which should be capable of delivering benefits for Greater Bideford (by which we include Appledore, Northam, East-the-Water, and Westward Ho!) and its wider Torrridge catchment within months, not years. There are other no-less urgently-required steps to improve the capacity and performance of that existing railway, too.

We have seen the success of dedicated bus links, timed to connect with trains at Barnstaple station, linking Lynton & Lynmouth (pop. 1,400) and more recently Ilfracombe (pop. 9,200). These mirror the success of three such links into Dartmoor Line trains at Okehampton station, connecting first with Tavistock (pop. 12,675) when the line re-opened in November 2021 and more recently with Bude-Stratton (pop. 10,589) and Launceston (pop. 8,428). Those dedicated bus links are in effect extensions of the train service – a virtual railway – and the same is seen as a very early priority for Greater Bideford (pop. 31,134); one recent non-stop trial run from Bideford Quay via the A39 and the newly-installed Old Torrington Road gate to Barnstaple station was achieved inside 20 minutes. Funding, marketing, competition rules, would all have to be worked on, but those other examples should inspire and motivate for a practical early win for Torrridge.

It's no secret that while the existing Barnstaple-Exeter line continues to break all known records for passenger journeys carried – the number of journeys to late-July this calendar year compared with the same period in 2019 is 11.5% ahead, despite infrastructure and workforce disruptions – its peak-time capacity and general performance leave a very great deal to be desired. Our focus is on what can be achieved within the known and stable framework of GWR's current contract which expires in June 2028, as feeding more passengers into the line from Greater Bideford via dedicated bus links could further worsen the already sub-standard current travel experiences.

GWR's Managing Director Mark Hopwood CBE, who has already visited the TRA twice since last December, has very clear ideas – which the TRA shares and supports – of what near-term infrastructure upgrades are required to deliver a train service which meets passengers' expectations, just as soon as he can secure funds and spending authority in what is now a business micro-managed by the Department for Transport through annual business plans. Given the geography of the line, much of that work and investment would not even be in North Devon but in Mid-Devon. The prospect of a third and final round of the Levelling-Up Fund may afford an opportunity for Mid-Devon District Council to seek such funding.

Probably the top priority is to modernise the train control system so that drivers do not have to manually exchange tokens at Crediton and Eggesford, and staff do not have to operate the level crossings at those stations. This would make the services more punctual and trim several minutes off journey-times. Another early priority is to return platform 2 at Barnstaple station to operational use, so that for example an extra train can be stored overnight ready for the next day's service and occasional rail tours, bringing hundreds of visitors to the area, can be stabled.

Project development work to secure our long-term goal must now include a detailed engineering study of route options between Bideford and Barnstaple, with the specific purpose of defining a preferred route to which the coming new Joint Local Plan can give legally-protected status, to guard against potentially prejudicial developments. Will the new fast rail link be coastal or inland, heavy or light rail? We will only be able to answer this by further funded studies. Will the new route navigate under, over or beside the active Tarka Trail? This again needs further studies. We currently anticipate that such a route will be broadly coastal, generally adjacent to or inland from the Tarka Trail to avoid sensitive locations such as Fremington Quay and Instow's tunnel and level crossing. Bideford is now recognised as the largest conurbation in the South West without rail meaning the transport issue needs immediate, intermediate and long-term solutions. It is perhaps ironic that reaching Bideford as the planned terminus is likely to involve no more than 700 metres of new railway inside the Town, the District, and the constituency of the Rt. Honourable Member with us this evening! If, as we hope, the terminus is a mainline station in the original Bideford town station, the reconfiguration of the first / last 70 metres of the new alignment will necessarily have direct implications for the cherished Bideford Railway Heritage Centre.

We also need to embed the extension of the Tarka Line to Bideford in the strategic and stable policy framework of Devon County Council's 'Devon Metro' network which has been so conspicuously successful in under-pinning rail developments elsewhere across the county, be they new stations such as Marsh Barton or re-opened lines such as Exeter to Okehampton with Tavistock-Plymouth following. Launched in 2011 as part of the County Council's 15-year Local Transport Plan, both are due for renewal in the near future and it is understood that the Department for Transport will be looking for the new Plans required of all local transport authorities to plan to a 2040 horizon, which very neatly coincides with that of the Torridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme and our own target for re-connecting Torridge to Devon's rail network at Bideford.

There is a real transport issue between Torridge and North Devon, a solution needs to be found that gives the public a sustainable choice! Once the Initial Business Case has been approved, further work will need to be done on finding the public's right solutions for the district and the report has positively identified that there is a need for more transport investment for the local area. Thank-you for your time and attention this evening.

Tim Steer

3rd August 2023