

# Reflections on my rail campaign

**Tim Steer**

Resigned TRA  
Vice Chair



**Dear readers,**

After three and a half years of rail campaigning, I have been taking stock of my activities and reviewing my role in some local organisations.

Firstly, thank you to all the supporting members of the community who offered me the

chance to deliver Atlantic Coast to Exeter (ACE Rail) presentations.

The Bideford rail link work and the associated important work to upgrade the existing North Devon line service has now been absorbed into the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance which was inaugurated last year.

Its first founder member was Bideford Town Council, followed by the Tarka Rail Association, Railfuture, Barnstaple Town Council, Northam Town Council, and Torridge District Council. Meanwhile Great Western Railway have confirmed Bideford as part of their South West vision plan and their managing director has publicly stated that he wants the North Devon line service upgraded as it would give the operator the greatest return on investment.

How did the campaigning start?

It all began in March 2021 when Bideford Railway Heritage Centre, of which I am a Director, acquired and returned to the town the Bideford locomotive name and number-plates.

At their display in the Burton Art Gallery and Museum exhibition which opened on August 29th 2021 the Mayor Councillor David Ratcliff said "It is very nice having the nameplate back in Bideford but what I really want is for the railway to return."

I was introduced to Cllr Ratcliff and invited to discuss bringing the railway back at Bideford Town Council.

After a Motion to support the rail link was passed, I began work in finding ways to get more support.

After I became a member of Railfuture, I wrote to them and explained that a new campaign had begun to rejoin Bideford to the rail network.

I acquired a copy of an earlier feasibility study, although I then realised that the official guidance on studies had changed since the study was produced in 1999 and that it was no longer up-to-date information, but it demonstrated as guidance that a rail link to Barnstaple had been evaluated as feasible.

Railfuture is Britain's leading independent organisation campaigning for a bigger better railway and they gave me some starting points on the

campaign work, as well as publishing my letter seeking assistance in their national magazine Railwatch.

After the magazine was published and available online, I received an email from Tarka Rail Association asking that I make contact with them and come to a committee meeting - this offer was taken up and I became a committee member at their AGM.

The Tarka Rail Association was originally formed to save the North Devon (Tarka) line from threat of closure.

This has however long-since ceased to be the case as the line continues to show record levels of passenger growth - and the reason why Bideford will one day benefit from being reconnected to the rail network. One of the aspirations of the TRA was to see Okehampton have a restored passenger service and in November 2021 the Dartmoor line was the first restored railway service under the previous government.

This incredible news meant that the ACE Rail campaign also became a local interest.

Bideford suffers socio-economic deprivation which is undeniably connected to poor transport links, which creates a reason why businesses and industries struggle or do not invest in the area.

An area that lacks essential infrastructure for a growing community struggles to deal with its associated hardship.

Infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, GPs and dentists you would like to think would be provided as the community develops, but this doesn't happen.

Many councils agree the system is very unfair as infrastructure should come before housing developments and not be up to campaigners.

North Devon Council and Torridge District Council are the local planning authorities and

jointly the district areas are known as 'Northern Devon'.

They, and sometimes the Planning Inspectorate on appeal, approve housing proposals but the new government has mandated that housing development must increase further.

This background is why the ACE Rail campaign has been taken so seriously.

The campaign is not just about restoring Bideford to the rail network; it is about making the Northern Devon area sustainable with proactive steps towards tackling congestion, car dependency and carbon.

If we restored that rail link tomorrow, the passenger loadings at Bideford station would cause the North Devon line to overload and it is already struggling with capacity!

When I delivered separate presentations to North Devon Council and Torridge District Council, ACE Rail re-



Original ACE Rail campaign supporters with the late Cllr Christie and late Mayor Cllr Ratcliff. Credit: Rob Dark



Railfuture best campaigner 2023. Credit: Tim Steer

ceived Motions of support and the rail link was added as an aspiration to the new joint local plan as well as being placed on other key development plans.

Torridge District Council's former vice chair Cllr Peter Christie was responsible for providing a Motion to support the rail link.

This local engagement work led to Railfuture inviting me to attend their national meeting at Senate House, London in July 2023 and giving me a joint gold award for Best Campaigner of the year.

Some comment that the Bideford railway was taken away in 1965 because it was underused, but it suffered from being mostly a branch line from Barnstaple not a through service from Exeter.

The age of the cheap motorcar meant that railways did decline with usage nationally, but the public are now wanting to make the modal shift back to using rail services.

One conspiracy that I have heard is that a line to Bideford would drain the area from the residents and become a satellite ghost town.

This is completely false - does Barnstaple filter out its 31k residents in the morning on the North Devon line services?

Has this happened to Okehampton?

Maybe this conspiracy is born out of fear that Bideford would lose its skilled workers but all restored railways have delivered incredible social and economic benefits; is there any community with a restored train service which now regrets it as having been a dreadful idea? Another perpetual comment is that the railway will take away the Tarka Trail.

Nobody can be that certain; a detailed engineering study will have to be commissioned, once the strategic socio-economic and environmental case for a rail link has been established. There is anyway a national government policy that one form of sustainable transport cannot take away another.

Both, an active travel route (Tarka Trail) and a rail link will be a requirement; the Exmouth line's Exe Trail and the Granite Way beyond Okehampton are examples, and in Bideford one only has to look at the trail and track next to each other at the south end of the Railway Heritage Centre.

Unfortunately, not everyone is still here to who helped develop the campaign.

We have sadly lost Mayor David Ratcliff and Cllr Peter Christie; their help will never be forgotten.

We can all discuss how the railway will look but I am completely confident that all the study work now being undertaken is being done by transport professionals who have lifetimes of knowledge, experience and judgement to deliver this project to completion, beyond the campaign that I started.

Thank you for your comments, letters and everyone who gave me support.

I might return to write columns one day but it may be in a different role.

Meanwhile, I wish the Tarka Rail Association many more years at representing the users of the North Devon (Tarka) line, but the time has come for me to resign as a co-Vice Chair of the Association.

**Tim Steer**