

# Next steps in hugely ambitious Devon rail revival

A coalition is leading the charge

DevonLive News By [Lewis Clarke](#)

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A coalition of councils, rail advocates, and business stakeholders is driving the push to bring transformative rail connections back to North Devon.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA), launched just over a year ago, aims to upgrade the North Devon (Tarka) Line and reinstate the long-lost rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford. With progress on business cases and public engagement, momentum is building for this ambitious vision.

"The Alliance has always had a two-part agenda," said Alan Clark, secretary of Railfuture Devon and Cornwall Branch, a founding member of the NDRDA. "Upgrade of the North Devon (Tarka) Line between Exeter and Barnstaple as well as a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple."

The NDRDA was founded in December 2023, with Bideford Town Council, Railfuture, and the Tarka Rail Association as its initial members. By early 2024, the alliance had grown to include Barnstaple Town Council, Northam Town Council, and Torrington District Council. Its launch event on March 1 in Bideford attracted representatives from over a dozen stakeholder groups, including Devon County Council, Great Western Railway (GWR), Network Rail, and the South West Business Council.

One of the Alliance's early accomplishments was drafting Strategic Outline Business Cases for both the modernisation of the Tarka Line and the potential extension to Bideford. These cases are essential to secure public funding and official endorsement. Clark emphasized that some councils have supported this effort financially but urged others to step up.

The movement for Bideford's rail revival gained traction in 2021 with two key developments: government funding for reopening the [Okehampton](#) line and the return of the Atlantic Coast Express locomotive nameplates to Bideford. These events spurred the ACE Rail campaign, which has since merged into the NDRDA.

The Alliance has been building a strong evidence base, highlighting record-breaking growth in passenger use of the Tarka Line. Network Rail's report on potential new stations placed Bideford as a strong contender, second only to Plympton in strategic merit. However, the report also underscored that upgrading the existing line is critical to addressing capacity and performance challenges.

In a recent parliamentary debate on "The future of rail services in Devon," North Devon MP Ian Roome highlighted the need for additional carriages on the Tarka Line. The Transport Minister present was reportedly attentive, and there are indications that GWR is expanding its train fleet, which could benefit services in Barnstaple and Okehampton.

The Alliance has also worked to address concerns about the potential impact on the popular Tarka Trail.

Mr Clark assured: "The Tarka Trail must and will continue between the two towns." He pointed to examples like the Granite Way near Okehampton, where railways and cycleways coexist successfully.

As 2025 begins, the Alliance remains focused on its dual goals: modernising the Tarka Line and laying the groundwork for a future Bideford extension. While the path forward involves complex feasibility studies and collaboration, the Alliance's efforts are paving the way for transformative rail connectivity in North Devon.

"The strategic case must first be established," Mr Clark noted. "But with steady progress, we can turn this vision into reality."