

# "Reopening of Bideford to Barnstaple railway 'transformational for North Devon'"

Support is growing for proposals to get the railway back

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News

By Lewis Clarke

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**Front row Karen Harley - BRHC, Linda Hellyer - Devon County Councillor for Bideford East, Bideford mayor David Ratcliff, Cabinet DCC lead for environment, climate and transport Andrea Davis, Torrridge District Council chair Doug Busby.**  
**Back row is Steven Trowbridge - BRHC, Clive Fairchild - BRHC, Roger Blake, Director of infrastructure and extensions for Railfuture, Tim Steer - Director and station manager for BRHC, John Skidmore - BRHC**

Support is growing for ambitious plans to reconnect Bideford's historic rail line with Barnstaple and the national network. The Tarka Rail Association (TRA) have welcomed visitors to both Bideford and Barnstaple Railway Station, where they have showcased the work currently being done to prepare for a future reopening.

The TRA currently has a membership of more than 200 with interest in the history of the line and future projects. Bideford saw its last passenger network service in 1982 as a special commemorative farewell trip before the line was uprooted. The last scheduled service was in 1965 before it had been a victim of the Beeching axe.

Tim Steer, chair of the Bideford Heritage Railway Centre and committee member for the TRA, said: "Bideford needs a railway service because it's the largest town without one in Devon. We don't have a train line in the Torrridge area, so people have to travel across to North Devon.

"The Tarka Rail Association have shown support to extend the line from Barnstaple to Bideford. We're in talks with many organisations and authorities and have support from many of them. Many residents in the area want to see more cars off the road. It's about ensuring people have faster service than just getting in the car to get to a certain destination. It's vital to get our public transport up and running again. It's the future; especially now we're all spending money as fuel costs increase."



**Bideford mayor David Ratcliff, Tim Steer - Tarka Rail Association, Annette Wheatley - Barnstaple in Bloom, Andy Hedges - Tarka Rail Association, Barnstaple town mayor Alan Rennles**

He added that work was continuing to improve stations and Bideford and Barnstaple and they were looking to get funding from the Restoring Your Railway Fund: "At Bideford, we are working on one of our carriages. Bideford Railway Heritage is looking at the cafe and museum, so tourists who come off the cycle trail will have somewhere to stop.

"There used to be a café here previously, but it closed due to Covid and sadly last year a lot of the windows were vandalised. That's what we're trying to put right. It would be nice to think it could open later this year, but we've got a lot of work. It's difficult to be sure what we could achieve this year."

He said that at Barnstaple, members of the TRA and volunteers from Barnstaple in Bloom had been busy on platform two to improve the look and visual impression of the town: "We want to show this Bideford bound platform and hopefully have it ready for people when the railway is restored to Bideford. Reopening the railway will give sustainable public transport to the area. It'll be a greener and safe passage for students and the public, and it means people will have other options to leave their cars at home. The next step is for me to do some more presentations to other councils and for them to understand the reasons why Bideford to Barnstaple railway service is a must."



Andrea Davis, Devon County Council cabinet member for climate change, environment and transport, was optimistic about the scheme. "It's lovely to see all these amazing people doing so much volunteering to keep the dream alive," she said. "It is about having a dream and being able to follow it through and getting all the right people on board with it. Tim has done an amazing job, raising the profile of trying to get the railway back to Bideford."

She added that the reopening of the Okehampton line to Exeter had reinforced the belief that railways are essential in bringing prosperity to rural areas. She continued: "We were the first county to have a railway reopened under the Restoring Your Railway Fund to Okehampton, and that's been phenomenally successful. It surpassed all our dreams despite Covid. If you think we had a lockdown, we had the Omicron, it was the middle of winter, but none of us could have ever expected what's happened."

"With the summer coming, it's going to show that if you reopen railways, it boosts towns like Bideford, like Okehampton, which desperately need a bit of economic activity. It opens up more pathways for residents to get to the opportunities that are further away. We need to get behind Tim, get behind the Tarka Railway Association and move this forward because this will be transformational for North Devon."

She said as well as economic and tourism benefits, it would also help young people during their education: "It means residents can access jobs elsewhere. It means our young people that might go away to get degrees in various specialist subjects could live here, and they can come back home or access jobs that are further afield. It will be transformational for everybody."

Linda Hellyer, Devon County Council member for Bideford East, added: "I regularly travel to County Hall by train, but I have to go to Barnstaple first, which is daft. I think reopening the station would be good for the area. We want to regenerate the area; we want more people to come here. Years ago, I worked in Midland Bank in Bedford; I used to be regaled by stories from the chief clerk about how he used to come on holiday to Westward Ho! by train."

"We've got so much new building planned for the area, particularly in East-the-Water and around Atlantic Village with two big estates, then another route to get to Barnstaple is welcomed."

Chair of Torridge District Council, Councillor Doug Bushby, added: "We see it all the time where they have demolished something in the past, uprooted it, and taken the tracks only for a few decades later to realise that there is an acute need for a railway. The cost will now be astronomical to reinstate it. All the local councillors are unanimously supporting it, and I'm one of them. Hopefully, it'll gain some momentum, and it will all come to fruition in the not too distant future."

Mayor of Bideford, Councillor David Ratcliff, welcomed the day it will reopen, saying: "It will be a good day for Bideford and Barnstaple to get us reconnected by rail. We've not had many negative comments about it whatsoever. I think the town is really behind it. There's plenty to offer for everybody, especially with the onslaught of fuel prices to the extent where rail travel is the way to go. We're trying to be forward-thinking, use what we have, and make it better."

Mayor of Barnstaple, Councillor Alan Rennles, welcomed the improvement to platform two of Barnstaple Station saying: "People are making a great effort. I'm impressed with the Buckingham Green locomotive on the platform; it's looking good. It's going to enhance the old platform, and we're happy. On behalf of the town, I'd like to thank the Barnstaple in Bloom and Tarka Rail Association, and we look forward to a smarter, cleaner Barnstaple."

For more information and to join the Tarka Rail Association, visit <http://www.tarkarail.org/>