

Bideford to Barnstaple railway line would have ‘high value’, says new report

A new study has backed up the benefits of reinstating the Bideford to Barnstaple rail line, but also said it relied on the Barnstaple to Exeter line being upgraded

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An improved Barnstaple to Exeter line would help pave the way for reopening the Bideford to Barnstaple extension. Credit: Tim Steer

By **Tony Gussin** 29 Sep 2025 3:34 PM

An independent study has found a reinstated Bideford to Barnstaple rail link would have ‘high value’ to the region’s development, transport network and tourism.

The five partners in the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which is developing a strategic business case for the scheme, heard the results of economic appraisal and engineering feasibility reports from SLC Rail at a Bideford workshop early in September.

Delegates reviewed evidence of the scheme’s potential strategic and economic viability and of its engineering feasibility in a way which would maintain the walking and cycling route Bideford and Barnstaple on the Tarka Trail or equivalent.

The SLC report said restoring the railway line ‘has high social and connectivity value, supporting regional development, sustainable transport and tourism in Northern Devon’.

But it also highlighted how an upgraded and improved Barnstaple to Exeter service was an important part of the Bideford extension becoming a reality.

It said: ‘the economic case is highly sensitive to scheme costs, service quality, improved journey time and service frequency between Exeter and Barnstaple and assumptions on housing development in the area’.

It added: ‘enhanced services - ie increased train frequency and faster journey times between Barnstaple and Exeter - are essential to unlocking suppressed passenger demand and improving the scheme’s economic value for money.

‘An upgraded Exeter-Barnstaple line could allow the Bideford extension to be delivered operationally with only mileage-related costs borne by the scheme’.

The recent Bideford workshop was attended by representatives from Devon County Council, Torridge District Council (which had contributed via their UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation), Bideford and Barnstaple town councils and Railfuture.

They received presentations on a preliminary strategic business case drafted by the alliance’s independent adviser Peter West OBE, as well as the SLC report.

A statement from the alliance said Bideford suffered from being badly connected by transport and Barnstaple suffered from severe traffic congestion, ‘ever-strengthening’ the case for additional transport.

Roger Blake, acting convener for the two dozen-strong alliance of organisations, said: “New through rail services for Bideford to and from Exeter, via Barnstaple, offer real hope of a more prosperous and sustainable future.

“No community which has had its train services restored has ever regretted it.”

Local campaigner Tim Steer, now chair of Railfuture’s Devon and Cornwall regional branch, added: “Our independent specialist’s professional assessment of Bideford station’s future use, based on projected housing and population growth and a modernised North Devon Line with shorter journey times and two trains every hour, could see Bideford in the top 20% of Britain’s mainline railway stations, putting this area on the map as a well-connected place to live, work and visit.”

The workshop heard the next step would be a decision from a transport authority, such as Devon County Council or the new Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority, to promote the Bideford extension scheme formally.

It would also need to commission a formal strategic outline business case that would be Government-compliant, building on the already-completed preliminary case.