

Plan to revolutionise Devon railway with new station

The aim is to put a forgotten town back on the map

DevonLive NEWS By [Lewis Clarke](#)

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Members of the community working together for a new railway link in Bideford

Peter West OBE isn't a man easily fazed. After a long and distinguished career working alongside Great Western Railway and other transport heavyweights, he could've comfortably slipped into retirement.

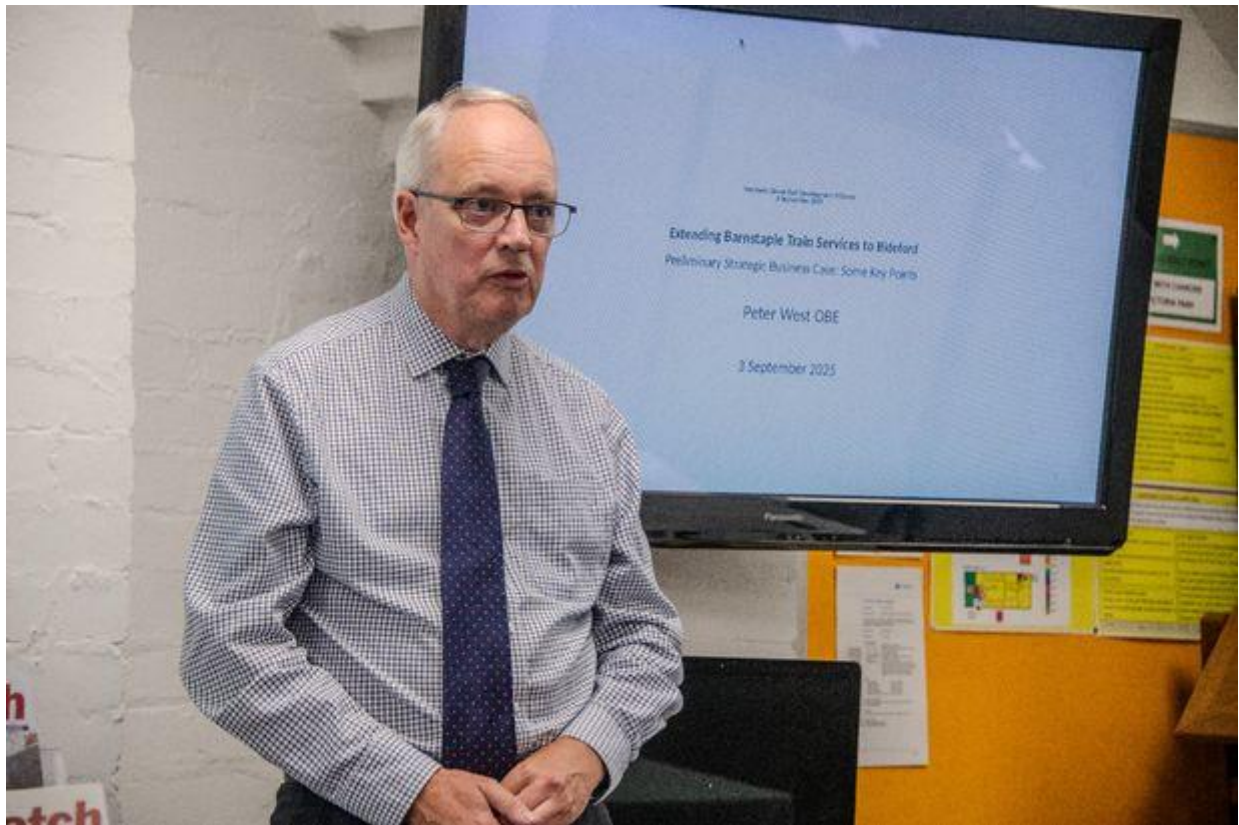
But when conversations with local leaders kept circling back to one question — how can North Devon's railways evolve to meet modern needs? — he found himself drafting not one, but two major strategic business cases: one for Barnstaple, and another for a bold extension to Bideford.

"This isn't a nostalgia project," Peter states. "It's not about recreating what was there in the 1960s. We're talking about extending a successful, growing rail line to meet modern demands — real people, real journeys, real opportunity."

At the heart of the matter is the urgent need for better connectivity across Northern Devon. Barnstaple's railway line, remarkably, is not only surviving post-COVID — it's thriving. "Most places are at 40% of pre-COVID usage," Peter explains, "but Barnstaple is way above. I haven't seen anywhere else performing as well."

That local success underpins the argument for extending the line to Bideford — a town frequently left out of the region's transport narrative. "Every time I look at tourist information," Peter observes, "it doesn't mention Bideford. It always starts with Barnstaple, maybe a passing reference to the bridge if you're lucky."

But putting Bideford back on the map isn't just about tourism. It's about jobs, access to healthcare, education, and ensuring communities on the edge aren't left behind. "There's this idea that when lines closed in the '60s, it was the right decision. But no one ever looked at keeping just Barnstaple to Bideford," Peter explains. "They closed a route that went through miles of empty countryside to Holsworthy. We're not recreating that — we're building something entirely new, based on today's needs."



Peter West OBE

That pragmatic mindset runs through every part of Peter’s analysis. The business case he developed — over 120 pages long for Bideford alone — doesn’t waste time rehashing depressing statistics, though the economic case is clear. “When Okehampton was under review, central decision-makers were shocked at the levels of deprivation. It’s the same story here.”

Instead, Peter focuses on momentum. The case for Bideford builds on the proven strength of Barnstaple’s route, growing passenger numbers, and clear examples from elsewhere — like the Borders Railway in Scotland, which revitalised economically depressed communities and drew new residents, tourists and jobs after its reopening.

“I was really struck by the data,” Peter says. “Seventy-one percent of tourists said they came because of the railway. A quarter wouldn’t have visited at all without it. And these aren’t theoretical projections — they’re actual post-reopening results.”

That real-world evidence is critical. Too many schemes flounder under scrutiny, partly because there’s little follow-up analysis on what reopened lines have truly delivered. For Peter, the Borders Railway stands out as one of the few comprehensive examples: “It showed that a railway isn’t just about transport — it can be the spine around which you build economic regeneration.”

Of course, it takes more than data to get a train running. Engineering feasibility, environmental compatibility, and the ability to maintain walking and cycling access along the Tarka Trail were all essential elements in the plan. But Peter is confident those hurdles have been cleared. The preliminary studies show the extension is viable — if the political will and funding follow.

One vital aspect is the timetable. Peter did more than write a report — he built a draft service schedule based on realistic assumptions. “A 15-minute journey from Bideford to Barnstaple is easily doable. I even looked at what that would mean in practice. You could leave Bideford at 7:06 and be in Exeter Central by 8:39.”

That might not sound revolutionary — until you compare it to existing bus routes. “Buses take much longer,” Peter says. “Then you’ve got interchange penalties — waiting around, missed connections. It drags everything out. Even if the route’s short, the actual experience can be miserable.”

Modernising the Barnstaple line is a crucial piece of the puzzle. Right now, the route is held back by slow speeds and single-track limitations. “The fastest train on the line averages 43 miles per hour,” Peter explains. “And that’s only at midnight on a Saturday when there’s nothing else on the track.”

With passing places and modest upgrades, travel times could fall significantly. “Take 20 minutes off a journey and it’s transformative. That means people arrive earlier, work more flexibly, make better connections. Suddenly, public transport becomes a real choice again.”

But today’s railway isn’t just too slow — it’s also straining under demand. “If you put new Bideford passengers on today’s trains, they’d be sitting on people’s laps,” Peter quips. “We need much more capacity.”

It’s a telling insight. For years, rural railways have been seen as quaint or expendable. But in Peter’s view, the line from Barnstaple — and its proposed extension — is anything but. “This is not a sleepy branch line. Crediton has seen extraordinary growth, largely due to the rail service. Bideford could follow the same trajectory.”

In fact, the line’s potential might far exceed what most expect. Projections based on housing and population growth suggest Bideford could land in the top 20% of mainline stations nationwide once connected. It’s a bold claim — but one backed by specialist modelling and a clearly mounting case.

Still, Peter is realistic about the challenges. “This is quite a slow railway. It’s not punctual. It doesn’t always cope with bad weather. Some stations are inaccessible to elderly or disabled passengers. And you don’t always get a seat — especially in peak hours.”

It’s that kind of straight-talking honesty that gives his proposals credibility. He’s not selling a fantasy. He’s building on what’s working, acknowledging what isn’t, and showing a clear path forward. And he’s not alone.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance — a coalition of over two dozen stakeholders — has thrown its support behind the proposal. The scheme is now recognised in Devon & Torbay’s Local Transport Plan and Peninsula Transport’s Strategic Implementation Plan, giving it the official status needed to push toward full approval and funding.

“No community that’s had its train service restored has ever regretted it,” said Roger Blake, acting convener of the Alliance. It’s a sentiment echoed by Tim Steer of Railfuture, who believes the service would elevate the area’s reputation and connectivity, making Bideford a more viable place to live, work and visit.

The alternative? “Build new roads? Improve bus services? Well, they already run every 15 minutes,” Peter notes. “Bus lanes? There’s houses in the way. It doesn’t add up.”

The environmental case is another strong undercurrent. Amidst climate concerns and growing traffic, the railway offers a sustainable, long-term solution. “It fits very well with the goals of accessibility, reducing car use, and giving people real options. And when it comes to sustainability — in its broadest sense — no one’s really arguing against that anymore.”

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Front row L>R: Cllr Claire Hodson, Deputy Leader of Torridge District Council; Cllr Janet Coates, Mayor of Barnstaple; Cllr Teresa Tinsley, Torridge District Council.

Back row, L>R: Cllr Peter Lawrence, Mayor of Bideford; Cllr Doug Bushby, Chair of Torridge District Council; Roger Blake, Railfuture Infrastructure Director and Acting Convener for Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance; David Northey, Chair of North Devon Line Rail Promotion Group; Cllr Peter Hames, Torridge District Council; Ian Baxter, Strategy Director, SLC Rail; Peter West, Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance independent adviser; Andrew Robinson, Senior Strategic Planner (Western), Network Rail; Tim Steer, Chair of Railfuture Devon & Cornwall regional branch; Daniel Burke, Bid Engineer, Navantia UK Appledore, David Whiteway, Regional Growth Manager (West), GWR; Chris Fuller, Economic Development Manager, Torridge District Council; Cllr Mark Barry, Devon County Council; Cllr Jamie McKenzie, Bideford Town Council.