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Support for rail link plan gathers pace

Proposed line would connect towns

ELLA SAMPSON

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A PROPOSED rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford has won considerable support.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance has put forward plans to establish a new connection between the two towns while also upgrading the existing Tarka Line, which links Exeter and Barnstaple.

FULL REPORT: PAGE 2



A busy Barnstaple railway station platform. Picture: Tim Steer



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A crowded platform at Barnstaple station, which campaigners argue proves the need for an expanded railway network in North Devon. Picture: Tim Steer

Proposals for new rail line to link towns wins support

ELLA SAMPSON

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A PROPOSED rail link between Barnstaple and Bideford has triggered a wide range of opinions.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which was established on March 1, has put forward plans to establish a new connection between the two towns while also upgrading the existing Tarka Line, which links Exeter and Barnstaple.

Bideford, whose railway station ceased public operations in 1965 and closed completely in 1982, could potentially see a revival of its transportation infrastructure through this initiative.

The alliance aims to revitalise the area, recognising the economic challenges Bideford has faced since the closure of its railway station. The proposed link has garnered support from some prominent figures.

Selaine Saxby, MP for North Devon, highlighted the need to enhance connectivity in the region, acknowledging the strain on current train services to Exeter.

She said: "We need to improve connectivity into North Devon. We have a fantastic train station in Barnstaple, and I am delighted to have helped save their ticket office! But spending time with the station team only last week with the Transport Secretary, Mark Harper, it is clear that many trains are at capacity to Exeter and we need to start making plans to increase capacity on the line.

"This initially may be extra rolling stock or increased services but rail improvement plans take decades to come to fruition and I



MPs Selaine Saxby and Sir Geoffrey Cox have backed the idea of a new railway link in North Devon

am pleased to see these conversations already under way."

Similarly, Sir Geoffrey Cox, MP for Torridge and West Devon, backed the reopening of rail communications, citing potential economic benefits and the need for improved transportation links to accommodate population growth.

He said: "I support the reopening of rail communications to Torridge and West Devon wherever possible. Last year, I held an extremely informative and constructive meeting with First Great Western Railway at the old Bideford station and they advised me the extension was at the top of their list of achievable projects in the South West."

However, concerns have been raised by some local residents, particularly about the project's impact on the Tarka Trail, a popular tourist attraction in the area.

Despite the enthusiasm expressed by some individuals for the project's potential benefits, others remain sceptical about its cost-effectiveness and convenience compared to existing transport.



Others did welcome the idea however, stating it would be "great if it ever happened" and saying it "would be great for Bideford".

Tim Steer, spearheading the rail link campaign, revealed to the *Gazette* that the forthcoming consultation would unveil the project's cost, although a date for this consultation remains undisclosed.

This consultation aims to determine the nature of the rail system, whether it would be a light or heavy railway, among other considerations.

Collaboration with Torridge District Council will also be pursued to explore various grant options to further support the project.

Mr Steer, who is also the vice-chair of the Tarka Rail Association and the ACE Rail lead officer, clarified that funding for the project would not be sourced from local councils but rather from the Department for Transport, given its categorisation as a business case and transport project.

Insisting that the Tarka Trail would be preserved, Mr Steer out-

lined the plan for a sustainable railway to run alongside it.

Drawing parallels with the Exeter to Exmouth Avocet Line, which co-exists with the Exe Estuary Trail, Mr Steer emphasised the feasibility of such projects.

While the location of a potential railway station in Bideford remains unknown, investigations will be conducted with the Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) which is the next body of work for this project.

This will be to identify the optimal spot for accessibility for cars, locals and walkers.

Mr Steer expressed full support for the initiative, describing it as "absolutely fantastic" and commended local councils for embracing and grasping the concept as a means to rejuvenate the area.

Jamie McKenzie, mayor of Bideford, said: "I am 100 per cent behind this idea as Bideford needs the boost this project could bring. The project would reduce CO₂ output in the area and would have a positive effect on the environment.

"The intention is to preserve the Tarka Trail. I realise people are worried about it as it's a real asset. My understanding is that, if anything, the trail will benefit. There is a small amount of negativity on social media from a vocal minority.

"The economic and regenerative effects of rail convective by far outweigh any of the negatives there might be. It could alleviate congestion with a knock on reduction on Barnstaple.

"Torridge District Council, in particular, have shown great support for the Alliance and have even funded part of the business plan that will outline the details people are clamouring for."