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Railfuture-inspired rail alliance

Newly elected MPs from each end of North Devon's Tarka line referred to the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, instigated by Railfuture in late 2023, in a Westminster Hall debate in December. On a motion introduced by Steve Race MP, the new Member for Exeter, "That this House has considered the future of rail services in Devon", he quoted from a recent meeting which he had had with representatives of the alliance. This drew a supportive intervention from Ian Roome MP, the new member for North Devon, which includes the South West's fastest-growing station at Barnstaple. At the other end of the Tarka line, Exeter's 10 stations are together by far the most-used from the 12 stations along the line.

This is the second time in recent years that the Tarka line has been spoken about in a Westminster Hall debate – and of course recorded for posterity in Hansard. In January last year, the previous North Devon MP, Selaine Saxby of the Conservative



Railfuture's plan to build on the Devon Metro success. A campaign aim is to ensure it is included in local transport plans as they are upgraded

Party, spoke about the proposed Bideford extension in a debate introduced by former rail minister Kevin Foster on the *Restoring Your Railway* fund. Ms Saxby's speech followed her request for a briefing from the former Tarka Rail Association with assistance from Railfuture. More info:

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Bideford-and-Barnstaple-to-Exeter-diary>

Railfuture in the news

We make good use of social media (@RailfutureDC), including Facebook groups ACE Rail and Tarka line friends and groups. Railfuture has also contributed to articles in the *North Devon Journal*, *DevonLive* and the *North Devon Gazette*. Branch Secretary Alan Clark featured in a *DevonLive* report about the Devon rail revival, referring to the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance.

The alliance's acting convener is Railfuture director Roger Blake, who was interviewed on New Year's Day by *BBC Radio Devon*:

<https://www.railfuture.org.uk/Railfuture-in-the-news>

Railfuture campaigns recognised

Network Rail has issued a new version of *Connecting Communities: framework assessment of new station opportunities on Western Route*. Bideford is one of five case studies. The new edition recommends that a minimum population of 10,000 is needed for a new station. The Greater Bideford area has a population of around 40,000 and has the second-equal strongest strategic case of the 23 potential stations studied in NR's western route area.

Railfuture welcomed the draft Devon & Torbay local transport plan for 2025-40 which includes proposals to accelerate and double services on the Tarka line. Railfuture went further, making the case for the Bideford extension. Journeys on the line increased by 12% from 2023 to 2024. Coupled with a 27% increase since 2019, the line



emerges with the best growth of any line in Britain. Railfuture has also developed a Devon Metro mark 2 plan for 2025-40 which we trust will be included when Devon County Council considers the draft local transport plan.

Exeter is the worst place in the South West for traffic congestion, followed by Plymouth, and then Barnstaple. The traffic congestion figures support the case for modernising existing rail links. Railfuture's aims to upgrade rail services on the Tarka line and extend to Bideford are recognised in the draft strategic implementation plan produced by sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport. In addition, the joint North Devon & Torridge economic strategy 2024-29 recognises that ensuring the Barnstaple-Exeter link has a journey time of under one hour and extending to Bideford are important.

Developing stakeholder alliance

More parish councils keen to improve rail services are joining the

Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance which is holding its second annual convention in Barnstaple. Navantia, which has acquired Harland & Wolff's Appledore shipyard, will be attending. The alliance has also given presentations to Westward Ho! Ladies Club and the Rotary Club of Barnstaple Link.

Connect Bude

The Bude Bus Branch-line Community Partnership, with help from Railfuture's fighting fund, will be gathering evidence to support integrating bus and rail connections for Bude and Stratton, as well as intermediate communities such as Holsworthy. The rail service is provided by the Dartmoor line, which will see the opening of Okehampton Interchange station next year.

Heathfield floods

The ambitions of Heathfield Rail Link Association suffered a devastating setback when flooding from December's Storm Bert wreaked havoc with the trackbed, as well as the adjacent Stover Trail and former Stover Canal. Prospects for using the branch line as a test-bed for the Revolution very light rail demonstration vehicle, backed by Eversholt Rail, now look unlikely.

Tavistock rail reopening

TavyRail is among the campaign groups nervously awaiting the government's spending review on 26 March. It is expected that there will be some up-to-date information about projects in the Department for Transport's cancelled *Restoring Your Railway* programme. Plymouth-Bere Alston-Tavistock already has a strategic outline business case, part-funded by Devon County Council.

GWR's fleet changes

Two ex-Transport for Wales class 175 Coradia trains are being assessed at Laira depot in Plymouth. This is a preliminary step before the 27 Coradia trains are "cascaded" to replace withdrawn IC125 trains. The Coradias are 27 years old but have been refurbished and are capable of 100mph running. Some are two-car and some three-car units. The Coradias should also enable the withdrawal of class 150 trains and are expected to enter service on the Dartmoor and Tarka lines.

Devolution white paper

The government is encouraging the emergence of strategic authorities with a population of at least 1.5 million. One possibility is a South West Strategic Authority taking in Cornwall and Devon, including Plymouth and Torbay, with devolved power to invest in transport. Railfuture will be on the look-out for new opportunities to progress our campaign schemes.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon+and+Cornwall+Branch



The moment in the House of Commons when Labour MP Steve Race highlighted the work of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance



The moment Lib Dem MP Ian Roome gave his backing to the work of the NDRDA

Railwatch is for Railfuture members, the rail industry and anyone interested in railways

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Alliance convention

A new campaign banner, which includes the Devon Metro 2 map, was launched in March at the second annual convention in Barnstaple of the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance. The six-page event brochure highlighted the achievements of the alliance over the past year.

Mayor of Barnstaple Janet Coates opened the convention with Great Western managing director Mark Hopwood CBE, who appeared via a video link.

Supporting statements came from the newly elected North Devon Liberal Democrat MP Ian Roome and from Andrea Davis, then chair of the Peninsula Rail Transport Forum. As Devon County Council's cabinet member for climate change, environment and transport she accepted the Railfuture Judges' Special Award in 2023.

Presentations were made on the draft business cases for modernising the existing Barnstaple-Exeter line and extending services to Bideford, and by Navantia UK Appledore shipyard stressing the importance of better public transport to support its expansion plans. The *North Devon Gazette* made good use of Railfuture's press release to publicise the event.

More information is available on the Devon and Cornwall page on the Railfuture website.

Seven more parish councils along the Barnstaple-Exeter line have joined the alliance in 2025, two making donations to the alliance. The recently formed Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station has also agreed to join the alliance. The Friends have been awarded funds from Great Western Railway for environmental improvements in and around the station. Railfuture benefited from publicity about its role in helping to set up the alliance.

Great Western has confirmed it is boosting its train fleet, with an eye to improving Barnstaple and Okehampton services.

Railfuture election videos

Shortly before Devon County Council's elections, the process to elect a new chair for Railfuture Devon and Cornwall began. Nominations had to be in by the end of May. One candidate became the first in the history of Railfuture to issue manifesto videos. The outcome of the election process will be published on the Railfuture Devon and Cornwall web page, and in the next *Railwatch*.

Community engagement

Campaigner Tim Steer made a presentation about the four-year-old ACE Rail campaign to the Rotary



RAIL UNITED: Delegates at the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance convention in March, with ACE Rail campaign lead Tim Steer (front centre) with two mayors to his right – host Janet Coates for Barnstaple Town Council and (left) Rachel Clarke for Bideford Town Council. The chair of Torridge District Council Doug Bushby is behind Tim's right shoulder, with Mid Devon District Council cabinet member Steve Keable behind Tim's left shoulder. Also pictured are Railfuture's policy director Ian Brown CBE, Railfuture member and NDRDA strategic adviser Peter West OBE and Railfuture director Roger Blake



Friends of Barnstaple Railway volunteers with Great Western's Gerrard Layton, second right, who came to assess them for site safety

Club of Barnstaple Link, which has welcomed him as a member. April 2025 was the fourth anniversary of the emergence of the ACE Rail campaign at a Bideford Railway Heritage Centre event to welcome the Bideford steam locomotive name plates, removed from the West Country class loco when it was scrapped in 1967.

Our plan is your plan

Four years of campaigning have seen a dozen submissions to official consultations, to ensure that the ACE Rail campaign ambitions are adopted as official policy. Both the Peninsula Transport Strategic Implementation Plan and the Devon and Torbay local transport plan have incorporated its aims.

Dartmoor line parkway station

The success of the OkeRail campaign in restoring regular daily passenger services to Okehampton will be augmented next year with the opening of Okehampton Interchange, which is supported by levelling up funds.

Integrated transport

PlusBus tickets have gone digital, thanks to great work at Traveline. Online booking of PlusBus tickets is now available for Bude, Launceston and Tavistock. Bude and adjacent Stratton have a population of around 10,500 and are 30 miles from the nearest railhead – at Okehampton. That meets the basic criteria to be featured in Network Rail Western Route's 2024 report

Connecting Communities: framework assessment of new station opportunities on Western Route. Of the 23 potential station locations assessed, however, Bude ranked 15th overall.



Connect Bude

The Bude-Stratton-Holworthy-Halwill Junction corridor is served by five daily buses each way Monday to Saturday, with three on Sunday, connecting with trains at Okehampton. Railfuture Devon and

Cornwall hopes that the opening of Okehampton Interchange station next year, broadly coinciding with the replacement of 40-year-old diesel trains by more comfortable 25-year-old diesel trains, will boost patronage to the point of justifying the extra cost of some additional connecting bus services. For some background on the campaign, see:

<https://connectbude.co.uk/2024/04/bude-okehampton-link-takes-a-step-forward-thanks-to-railfuture-funding/>
<https://connectbude.co.uk/2025/03/survey-reveals-overwhelming-support-for-bude-rail-restoration/>

Launceston Town Council aspires to be reconnected to rail services, although the town did not feature in the Connecting Communities Network Rail report. The size of the community, at fewer than 8,500 population, is deemed insufficient to warrant further investigation.

At present the town has four daily (Mon-Sat) bus services in each direction, connecting with the train services at Okehampton 20 miles away. Like Bude, Launceston is likely to be able to secure only modest increases to those services for the foreseeable future. However, the opening next year of Okehampton Interchange station may assist both Cornish communities. Undeterred, however, Connect Launceston has emerged as the rail campaign brand, and it is hosted on Connect Bude's website.

TavyRail waits for verdict

Meanwhile campaign group TavyRail was awaiting the outcome of the government's spending review in the hope of positive news. TavyRail's *Restoring Your Railway* bid had got as far as funding a strategic outline business case before the whole programme was cancelled in July last year by chancellor of the exchequer Rachel Reeves.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon+and+Cornwall+Branch

Railfuture Member of the Year 2024-25

Do you know an individual Railfuture member who has contributed to the success of the organisation? Perhaps they have raised the profile of Railfuture in their local area?

Or they may volunteer helping run their local branch? Whoever they are if you think they deserve recognition we would like to hear about them.

Send a written statement of no more than 500 words explaining why they deserve to be recognised. All Railfuture individual members (not RUGs) are eligible to be nominated. This award is separate from the Rail User Group (RUG) Awards which have their own nomination criteria. The deadline for nominations to be received is 27 June 2025.

The award will be presented at our AGM in July 2025.

For further details or to submit a nomination please email Wendy Thorne: at wendy.thorne@railfuture.org.uk

Nine class 66 freight locos are to be fitted with in-cab European Train Control System equipment

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New leadership

A press release about Tim Steer becoming the new chair of Railfuture Devon and Cornwall was used in 10 local media news items and a video of his acceptance speech led to radio interviews. At Devon County Council, a complete change of cabinet took place in May which affected Andrea Davis, who collected Railfuture's Judges' Special Award on behalf of the county council in 2023. The former deputy council leader has also lost her role as cabinet member for climate change, environment and transport but she retains her own seat in North Devon, and continues as chair of Exmoor National Park Authority.

Railfuture's consultation responses were incorporated into the 2025-40 local transport plan of the Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority, which will become the official transport authority in April.

Out and about

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall chair Tim Steer visited Truro, to see the new MP for Truro and Falmouth Jayne Kirkham. She is keen to see the Mid-Cornwall Metro completed between Falmouth and Newquay, via Truro and Par. She also wants the restoration of a rail link for freight at Falmouth Docks, to take advantage of the possibility of transporting lithium from Cornwall.

Tim has also been invited to participate in the North Devon and Torridge Maritime Network, furthering his call for reinstating main line rail services across North Devon and into Bideford.

Tim continues to maintain established close working relations with officers and elected members at Bideford and Barnstaple town councils.

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, instigated by Railfuture in 2023 has taken part in several "meet the people" summer events.

Stakeholders recognised the 171-year history of King's Nympton station and its renaming in 1951 from South Molton Road. Bideford Railway Heritage Centre hosted the Alliance, at Bideford's Summer Fair and then at their Gala Day.

Peninsula projects pipeline

The South West peninsula had mixed fortunes from government announcements subsequent to the chancellor's comprehensive spending review in June. Transport secretary Heidi Alexander's July statement to Parliament

"Transforming the UK's road and rail networks" was quickly followed by the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority's Infrastructure Pipeline. It had been foreshadowed by the Treasury's 10-year infrastructure strategy



Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station welcomed the return of the 5th North Devon Scout Group following their February visit, for a safety briefing, towards their 'Platforms for change' badge. The Scouts helped the Friends with their environmental work around the station and then took a Great Western-funded train trip to visit Eggesford Forest. At the station, two Scout leaders were honoured with 15-year service certificates, consolidating ties between the railway and the community



Railfuture Devon and Cornwall branch secretary Alan Clark (fourth left) and Tim Steer (fourth right) represented Railfuture and Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station at an event at Crediton station, to celebrate a heritage project in the waiting room and an equal access initiative at the Station Tea Rooms. Grants for the projects came from GWR and the Community Rail Development Fund



RAIL 200 CELEBRATION: Supporters of Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance helped King's Nympton celebrate its history in August. The picture includes Martin Pailthorpe of the station's Friends group (holding sign), Railfuture's Tim Steer (centre with green lanyard), Barnstaple mayor Janet Coates (foreground with chain of office) and North Devon MP Ian Roome (on Janet's right). The station opened in 1854 as South Molton Road. It was renamed King's Nympton in 1951

published the previous month. There were green signals for two new stations between Taunton and Exeter, at Cullompton in Devon and at Wellington in Somerset.

"Pausing" works to strengthen the lineside cliffs near Teignmouth as part of the South West Rail Resilience Programme has prompted a petition calling on the



BIDEFORD GALA DAY: (left to right) County councillor Mark Barry, Tim Steer and Bideford mayor Peter Lawrence

government to reinstate the work. TavyRail campaigners were disappointed that their arguments for government funding to develop the scheme for a reinstatement of the Tavistock-Plymouth line, via Bere Alston, were not mentioned in the spending review.

TavyRail chair Richard Searight said: "To say that we were surprised at the government's lack of interest in the South West and therefore the Plymouth-Tavistock line restoration, would be an understatement. We were flabbergasted."

"We thought the government wanted growth. Railways are one of the best ways to create growth – except, apparently, in the South West."

There were cautionary signals for three Access for All schemes at Bodmin Parkway, Castle Cary and Yeovil Junction. South Devon MP Rebecca Smith, whose constituency covers parts of both Devon and Plymouth and who sits on the House of Commons Transport Committee, was understandably frustrated.

Making the case for consistent investment in rail, Railfuture gave evidence to the Commons transport committee's "rail investment pipeline" inquiry which concluded in July.

The investment pipeline was also discussed at the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance's Barnstaple convention in March and at a workshop in Bideford in September.

The Bideford workshop was for representatives of enablers of a study for extending main line services to Bideford: Torridge District Council, Railfuture, Devon County Council, and Bideford and Barnstaple town councils. GWR supplied data for the study Reports of Barnstaple's rail campaign are proving popular on Devon Live.

More information on the website: www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon+and+Cornwall+Branch

The government wants economic growth, more homes and more jobs – Rail enables all three

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Funding five get-together

Five of the organisations which have provided funding for an economic study into bringing rail services from Exeter to Bideford met in September for a workshop organised by the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance. The venue was The Burton at Bideford Museum and Art Gallery. The financial support enabled Railfuture to commission an independent specialist assessment, on behalf of the alliance, for a preliminary strategic business case. Railfuture used its Fighting Fund to match Torridge District Council's one-third share. Other contributions came from Bideford and Barnstaple town councils and Devon County Council's locality budget.

The alliance's independent adviser, Railfuture member Peter West OBE, gave presentations on business cases in general and his draft preliminary strategic business case. SLC Rail's strategy director Ian Baxter gave an energetic and optimistic report on his consultancy's findings. Full details can be viewed in the Bideford and Barnstaple to Exeter page of the Railfuture Devon and Cornwall website. The SLC Rail appraisal predicted that, with ideal conditions, Bideford station could match Weston-super-Mare's current passenger use by 2040.

Following the Railfuture press release, reports appeared in three local newspapers.

BBC South West Spotlight also interviewed the alliance's convener Roger Blake at Bideford station.

Bude by bus

Railfuture's Fighting Fund supported a study in Cornwall undertaken by Railfuture-affiliated Connect Bude.

Richard Wolfenden-Brown chaired a public meeting following Connect Bude's AGM at the Falcon hotel in Bude in October. Speakers included Dave Gordon from Connect Launceston, Tim Steer from Railfuture Devon and Cornwall, Bruce Thompson and Katie Goode. Bruce is advising Connect Bude on encouraging Devon County Council and Cornwall Council to work together to improve the cross-border bus service from Bude to Okehampton town station and the planned Okehampton Interchange. Committee member Katie Goode updated the audience on the collection of bus use data.

Katie said "Railfuture's support has been invaluable in helping Connect Bude gather the evidence base we need to demonstrate the real demand and value of improved public transport connectivity to Bude. Their backing meant we could focus on delivering a

Picture: LEWIS CLARKE



Bideford funders get together: Among those pictured are (front row left to right) Torridge District Council deputy leader Claire Hodson, Barnstaple Town Council mayor Councillor Janet Coates and Torridge District Councillor Teresa Tinsley

Picture: NIGEL LEWIS



Railfuture Devon & Cornwall regional branch chair Tim Steer holding the British Rail Bude sign, left, with Connect Bude chair Richard Wolfenden-Brown. Katie Goode is on the left

Picture: TIM STEER



Peter West OBE gave a presentation to the Bideford funders get-together on preparing strategic business cases

high-quality survey and robust results, rather than struggling to organise it on limited resources. Thanks to Railfuture, we have been able to take a big step forward in building the case for better connections for our community." Copies of *Railwatch* were given to members of the audience.

Biosphere consultation

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall has responded to the consultation on the North Devon UNESCO Biosphere reserve's draft strategy for the next 10 years. The Railfuture press release was accompanied by a



SLC Rail's Strategy Director Ian Baxter gave an optimistic report based on his consultancy's findings

picture of part of the former 19th-century rail alignment co-existing with the 20th-century active travel route. The consultation response and press release can be viewed in the online diary for the Bideford and Barnstaple to Exeter campaign section of the branch website.

New website for Heathfield

Heathfield Rail Link Association launched its new website in September, promoting reopening of the five-mile rail route from Newton Abbot to Heathfield. The association, chaired by Railfuture member Michael Cooke, has



Picture: RICHARD GREEN (BBC)

Blake at Bideford. Roger Blake is Railfuture's Infrastructure director and is also acting convener for the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance

highlighted the growth in population and the 160 companies operating from the local industrial estate. Although not shown as part of Devon Metro, the new Devon & Torbay local transport plan recognises the Heathfield branch line as a "movement corridor" and the need to engage with the rail industry and third-party promoters to explore opportunities for passenger and freight use to return.

Coradias are coming

At GWR's stakeholder forum in October, Railfuture was told that deploying class 175 Coradia trains from Wales to enhance Great Western Railway services in Devon and Cornwall is proving difficult. Storing the trains in the open has caused problems and driver training has been delayed. The trains are being refurbished as part of a £75 million deal with Alstom, but the full fleet is not expected to be in operation until the end of next year.

It is hoped the 26 trains will bolster GWR's punctuality and reliability. In the first stage, the Coradias should replace the few remaining InterCity 125 trains this month. The Coradias are also earmarked for the overcrowded Exeter-Barnstaple line, as well as Mid-Cornwall Metro services for Newquay and the new Okehampton Interchange station.

Monorail response

Railfuture has responded with a dose of common sense to a local newspaper "letter to the editor" which called for a monorail from Bideford to Barnstaple and Exeter.

Dodgy dates detailed

Stakeholders recognised the 171-year history (not 151 as reported in October's *Railwatch*) of what is now King's Nympton station, having opened as South Molton Road in 1854 (not 1874) when rail services first reached Barnstaple from Exeter.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon-and-Cornwall+Branch

The government wants economic growth, more homes and more jobs – Rail enables all three

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Railfuture in the News

Hats off to Tim Steer and Roger Blake for getting Railfuture in the South West media about twice a week, talking about Bideford, Barnstaple, GWR, overcrowding, Okehampton and more. This coverage demonstrates the value of nurturing relationships with local journalists. Elsewhere we made it into the i paper, LBC News, BBC One, BBC Radio Wales and The Telegraph on a variety of subjects, the latter contacting us again for our comment just before Railwatch went to print. It looks as if the government is finally going to abandon the use of RPI for calculating rail fare increases and use CPI instead. This is something we have been campaigning on for years. Our efforts may have paid off! As ever, all this and more can be found on the web page Railfuture in the News.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Railfuture-in-the-news