

Ambitious plans to restore Bideford's rail link on right track

Bideford Town Council backed the proposal to investigate getting an Atlantic Coast Express (ACE rail)

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Tim Steer talks at Bideford Town Council

Support for reconnecting Bideford's rail links with the national network are on the right track.

Bideford Town Council backed the proposal to investigate getting an Atlantic Coast Express (ACE rail) to look at restoring a line between the town and Barnstaple.

Tim Steer, who has taken a lead in the ACE rail scheme and is the director of Bideford Railway Heritage Centre, spoke to Bideford Town Council at their meeting on Thursday, January 20, explaining why a new link was needed.

He explained: "The whole Tarka Trail from Bideford to Barnstaple is in danger of being under water by 2030, so a sea defence with integrated railway and active travel on top would be an engineered solution.

"I named our railway line the Atlantic Coast Express railway or simply ACE rail.

"We've even got the old ACE rail nameplate with us at Bideford Railway Heritage Centre, so it's got some historic value to it."

He told members that Bideford saw its last passenger network service in 1982, but that the last scheduled service was in 1965 and had been a victim of the Beeching axe.

“We kept it on for freight use up to 1982,” he added, “but after 1982 that was it. When it was the final day of the service, British Rail decided to put on one special passenger service.”



The 'Last train to Torrington' calls at Bideford. 6.11.82. Photo: Roger Joanes.

In 1982, Bideford saw its last special national network service. The scheduled passenger service finished in 1965.
The picture shows that 1982 special service and some of the 843 passengers for that day

He said that the Government were now looking at a Restoring Your Railway Fund and would hope to bid to be part of that discussion.

“This central government programme will help councils support left behind communities,” he explained.

“It is there to help provide access to jobs and education, supporting new housing developments and boost tourism. It will help develop local economies and cut down on car emissions and ease local road congestion.

“Anyone who lives on the road towards Barnstaple will know most people at the moment use their private car.

“There are 30,000 residents in Bideford, Northam Westward Ho! and Appledore combined.

“Sustrans have summarised that integrating walking and cycling with public transport is essential to make it easier for people to leave their cars at home. It’s something we can think about for our own Tarka Trail and the South West Coast Path.”

He explained that Devon County Council had looked at safeguarding the track with a 1999 Mounsell Report, which concluded that the bypass at Barnstaple needed to be constructed with enough clearance to create a railway in the future, among other recommendations.



In 1999, DCC and NDDC paid a team to carry out a feasibility study (The Maunsell Report). The report stated that the Barnstaple bypass was to be constructed with enough height clearance for a future railway. Also that the route would need to be reinvestigated in the future. Today, you will see double decker buses using the underpass.

“On the left hand side of the bypass, it has indeed, been left clear for future railway use,” Mr Steer said.

“If you went there, you’d see just a bit of land which doesn’t look like much, but we have an area ready for a future railway.

“If it was brought back, a Bideford for Exeter railway service would take just over an hour, and lead onto services to Waterloo via Axminster.”

He said a railway station would be a boost for the whole of North Devon.

“It would boost access for visitors, and help battle congestion on the A39, A361 and B3223,” he said.

“It’s in line with the government’s carbon-neutral targets and gives access to further and higher education students. It also offers tremendous employment opportunities.

“The proposed starting points are forming Bideford Town Council’s Atlantic Coast Express Railway Committee, joining with Torridge and North Devon District Council, and ask Devon County Council and Peninsula Transport for support.

“We include Network Rail and GWR in our meetings and finally engage an independent specialist advisor to provide a prospectus for ACE rail as a basis for a basic strategic outline business case.”

Mayor Councillor David Ratcliffe said: “Bideford is going to need this because we’re going to be under a lot of pressure in years to come with housing, and cars and such, so this is the right thing to do. It will be a good thing for us to look forward to.”