

Modern rail link could end Bideford's 60-year wait

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PLANS for a multi-million-pound rail extension to Bideford would provide a "modern train service" rather than a heritage attraction, according to a new report.

The Preliminary Strategic Business Case, authored by Peter West OBE, suggests that reconnecting the town to the national network could tackle "very weak so-

cio-economic conditions" and transport "peripherality" in North Devon.

Passenger services to Bideford were withdrawn in 1965 following the Beeching cuts, leaving the town as one of the largest in the region without a rail link.

The report by Mr West emphasises that while "reopening" is the term often used, the proposal is a forward-looking infrastructure project designed to meet future housing and economic needs.

It notes that the scheme has already attracted "considerable local interest and enthusiasm," but warns that the

document is intended as a "sober assessment" where risks are not diluted.

The business case outlines several key justifications for the project:

- **Economic growth:** Local employers in sectors like defence and renewable energy report that "hard-to-recruit" specialists are deterred by poor transport links.
- **Competitive travel:** A direct journey from Bideford to Exeter St Davids would take approximately 81 minutes, making it competitive with

car travel during peak-hour congestion.

- **Housing targets:** With mandatory government targets requiring over 1,300 new homes annually in the area, the report argues rail is essential for sustainable growth.

Mr West's report points to the recent success of the Dartmoor Line to Okehampton as a blueprint.

That project saw usage forecasts exceeded in its first two years and currently operates at a small surplus, requiring no subsidy. The report suggests Bideford could see even higher demand, with an estimated

343,000 passengers per year, ranking it around 1,000th out of nearly 3,000 stations nationally.

However, the costs are significant. The report estimates the capital envelope for the project at between £305 million and £539 million.

A primary concern for many residents is the fate of the Tarka Trail, which occupies the former trackbed.

The business case identifies a "modified version of the original coastal alignment" as the preferred route. Crucially, it states that the "retention and improvement of the Tarka Trail" is a central objective, aiming to integrate the cycle

path with the new rail infrastructure rather than replacing it.

The report concludes that the aspiration to return trains to Bideford is "sufficiently realistic" to justify further work.

While the current economic case shows a mid-range Benefit-Cost Ratio (BCR) of 0.23, the report notes that under specific future assumptions, including increased housing density, this could rise to a "high value" BCR of 2.0.

The document is intended to start the decision-making process, with the next step being the potential development of a full Strategic Outline Business Case.

The Bideford rail link is already being built

Tim Steer

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall Regional Branch Chair



YOU can't yet see a tangible railway line between Bideford and Barnstaple, however the building work has already started - building the case for it. Nobody can say where the station(s) or coastal alignment will be located as this requires further case-making known formally as HM Treasury's five-case model, following the Department for Transport's Transport Appraisal Guidance for business cases - the strategic, economic, commercial, financial, and management cases.

Achievement of project requires adherence to process, and the Department for Transport's March 2018 industry-agreed Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline is that process. It has five Decision points, each preceding one of five stages, the first three of which progress to a different level of business case - Strategic Outline Business Case, Outline Business Case, Full Business Case.

In 2024, Railfuture commissioned SLC Rail to undertake an Economic Appraisal with Engineering Feasibility, with Torridge District Council funding support following inclusion of assessing the feasibility of a link in their Strategic Plan. SLC's study demonstrated that with the local housing growth targets around the Greater Bideford area (East the Water, Appledore, Bideford, Northam, and Westward Ho!) 83 per cent of Bideford station users would be 'new to rail.'

Torridge is now the only Devon



Tim Steer holding Bideford sign by Ian Brown CBE

district without a railway station. Communities closer to Okehampton in the adjacent West Devon district will soon be using a second station - 'Okehampton Interchange.' District authorities have limited time before they become a new uni-

tary authority, and Devon County Council who developed the new Local Transport Plan (LTP4) will no longer be the statutory transport authority after 31st March. Devon and Torbay Combined County Authority adopted Local Transport

Plan 4, 2025-40, and replace DCC from 1st April.

LTP-4 states "working in partnership with the rail industry and local groups, we will support ongoing feasibility work for the potential extension of the North Devon Line to Bideford." Peninsula Transport also included the extension from Barnstaple to Bideford in its Strategic Implementation Plan 2025-50 under "Long Term Strategic Schemes."

Having the statutory transport and strategic authorities showing the Bideford rail link in their official plans gave the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance a green signal to produce a Preliminary Strategic Business Case (PS-BC) for Bideford: "A new train ser-

vice connecting Bideford with Exeter and beyond." One extraordinary finding in the PSBC / SLC work is "A substantial level of usage of Bideford station is likely: lower than Barnstaple, but higher than Okehampton - placing it 1,000th out of c.2,960 stations nationally." This challenges the concern that Bideford would be little-used, instead bringing evidence that it will be one of the top used stations in the country!

The PSBC Executive Summary also states "Retention and improvement of the Tarka Trail as a central, integral feature of the scheme." This settles the fear that a Bideford railway will ruin the 9-miles of Tarka Trail between Bideford and Barnstaple.

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