

Rail link will give businesses positive signal to drive growth

Tim Steer is regional chair of Railfuture, which campaigns for better rail services



FOR some, the campaigning to restore a rail link to Bideford has been seen as the work of railway enthusiasts who want to play with toy trains.

"Pipe dream," "white elephant," and "vanity project" are all social media comments that can be seen, but they are myth-busted the moment a formal business case is published.

Why did I plant the seeds for this civil engineering project? I want to see economic prosperity in northern Devon and solve local congestion.

Railways have been a key indicator of why to invest in an area; communities with poor connectivity are well known to suffer from deprivation associated with businesses not being prepared to invest in those areas.

Some say they want a hospital in Bideford instead of a railway but no one is currently campaigning for this hospital and the Department for Transport's ring-fenced funding is non-transferable to the Department of Health and Social Care.

What will surprise you is that if, or when, a rail link to Bideford is restored, you will have a better chance

of getting that hospital or education provider; in other words, supportive infrastructure comes with improved connectivity.

The rail link would give businesses the "green signal" to invest in the local area as they would be able to sustain their employment levels with skilled labour able to reach Bideford by mass rapid transport.

Some say that there is already a bus service from Bideford to Barnstaple, but that only gets caught up in traffic congestion, even if it is a new battery model.

As hundreds of new houses are developed around Bideford and Barnstaple, this bus service will have to increase its overall journey time.

Fortunately, we have high-level experts working on the Bideford rail link as well as the North Devon line modernisation (both employed and voluntary) that will deliver an improved service for the existing line first.

This means you will experience a modern line with two services per hour, helping to deal with overcrowding and offering an improved journey time to compete with private vehicles.

There has never been a desire to take away the Tarka Trail or the South West Water sewage main riser between Barnstaple and Bideford.

Just think how people across London must have felt when they learned that the new Elizabeth line was going to be constructed across the city, a line that now carries 800,000 passengers per day! The



Tim Steer says railways have been a key indicator of growth potential; communities with poor connectivity are well known to suffer from deprivation. Picture: Graham Hobbs

Elizabeth line is a fine example of a project that a minority of the public thought could not be built because of utility lines, footpaths, roads and housing; yet, those behind the project found a way.

I want to see that vision for northern Devon.

The idea that local roads can take

the strain has been disproved; we now live in a society where people have to leave for work earlier and arrive home later.

We now know the majority of the public want to see better transport connectivity, and we will do what we can to deliver that for our communities.

Council to save sports site project

TORRIDGE District Council has voted to provide an extra £38,000 to rescue a project aimed at bringing high-quality sports facilities to the region, writes Ella Sampson.

At a meeting on April 27, councillors agreed to cover a funding shortfall for the creation of two Playzones, all-weather, accessible outdoor spaces designed to encourage football and community activity.

While the projects in Holsworthy and Great Torrington have been given the green light, a third proposed site in Bideford has been scrapped following local opposition.

The council cited "overall viability" and "rising local concerns" as the primary reasons for abandoning the Bideford extension.

The new facilities are part of a wider strategy to improve health and wellbeing across North Devon. The council confirmed that the successful sites will be at Stanhope Park, Holsworthy and the former tennis courts in Great Torrington.

These sites were chosen to address a lack of outdoor sports provision in the area.

The project is largely funded by the Football Foundation and



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Inspectors praise school improvement

THE Ilfracombe Academy has been recognised for making significant progress following its latest inspection by Ofsted, writes Alex Haynes.

Inspectors judged the school to be meeting the 'expected standard' across all areas, including teaching, behaviour, achievement and leadership, marking a step forward from its previous 'requires improvement' rating.

The report accentuates what inspectors describe as "rapid improvements", particularly in students' behaviour and academic outcomes, as well as rising attendance levels.

Describing the school environment, inspectors said it is "a friendly place where pupils co-operate well with one another and feel safe."

They also found that students are leaving the school better prepared for the future, noting that they gain relevant qualifications enabling them to move into ventures suited to their interests and aspirations.



Ilfracombe Academy headteacher Steve Rogers. Picture: Ilfracombe Academy

The careers guidance offered is linked to local opportunities and aimed at broadening pupils' ambitions, confidence and personal development.

Achievement across the school has

seen a substantial increase, with the report pointing to improved quality of work. Inspectors added that pupils "listen attentively to staff and complete work they are proud of".

Support for mental health and

wellbeing was another key strength, and staff were recognised for helping pupils overcome challenges both inside and outside the classroom.

Headteacher Steve Rogers said the outcome reflected a collective effort across the school community.

He said: "We are absolutely delighted with this outcome, which reflects the hard work and commitment of our staff, students and the wider school community."

"This report recognises the significant improvements we have made, and it is especially pleasing to see our students praised for their attitude to learning."

Ofsted has recently introduced a new inspection framework designed to give a fairer and more detailed picture of school performance, replacing the previous single-word judgements.

Mr Rogers added that while the school is proud of its progress, it is focused on continuing to improve in the years ahead.

Sport England, which are providing 75 per cent of the capital for each site.

Councillor Lyndon Piper, lead member for leisure, said the external funding was too good an opportunity to miss.

"These facilities will help facilitate training and outdoor activity for all age groups whatever the weather, whilst protecting grass pitches during times of heavy rain," Cllr Piper said.

He added that the move would support community-led active play and help local sports clubs which are currently struggling with limited facilities.

With the funding secured, the focus now shifts to the planning stage.

The planning applications for the Holsworthy and Torrington sites are expected to be debated by the planning committee this June.

If approved, the Playzones will offer safe, inclusive environments designed to encourage football and other sports, particularly for groups that typically face barriers to participation.