

Bideford Town Council meeting, 24th September 2026

from Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall regional branch chair, Tim Steer

Introduction

I present this to you ten days after the closing date for three volunteers to have applied to join the Bideford Regeneration Board, one role requiring expertise in infrastructure and transport. The Board has said that it wants someone with relevant expertise to support engagement and provide oversight of future transport and infrastructure projects.

Background

For over five years this Town Council and successive Mayors have been the leading local supporters of renewed campaigning for Bideford to see regular mainline passenger rail services return to the town.

2021

August - Mayor David Ratcliff (RIP) opened an exhibition, in The Burton at Bideford Art Gallery and Museum, of insignia returned from the West Country locomotive '*Bideford*' and remarked that what he really wanted to see returned to the town is its passenger railway service.

2022

January - the Town Council received my presentation "*Restoring your Railway - Bideford to Barnstaple, main line service*" when I was a Director of Bideford Railway Heritage Centre (BRHC), as I introduced the new campaign for ACE Rail (Atlantic Coast-Exeter).

February - the Town Council set up and held the first meeting of an ACE Rail group.

February - the Town Council's Environment & Decarbonisation Committee agreed that "*£3,000.00 is provided from the Climate Change budget to support the Environmental aspect of the Economic Report and the benefits to the decarbonisation of Bideford, and Letters are written to the Stakeholder Town and Parish Councils advising them of the Project and inviting contributions; the Local MPs are similarly appraised.*"

February - former Mayor Peter Christie (RIP) wrote about BRHC and "*bringing back a working rail line between Bideford and Barnstaple*" in a local paper.

April - at the Town Council's Annual Parish meeting the report from the Chair of the Decarbonisation & Environment Committee included a paragraph on "*the work by ACE Rail to reconnect Bideford to the mainline rail network.*"

August - Deputy Mayor of Bideford and Torridge District Councillor Jamie McKenzie and former Mayor David Ratcliff and wife Phillipa, and former County Councillor for Bideford East Linda Hellyer, were among the delegation meeting the MP for Torridge & Tavistock the Rt. Hon Sir Geoffrey Cox KC with me at the Bideford Railway Heritage Centre.

2023

January - Deputy Mayor of Bideford and Torridge District Councillor Jamie McKenzie and former Mayor David Ratcliff and wife Phillipa, and former County Councillor for Bideford East Linda Hellyer, were among the group of local Mayors with me and others meeting at Crediton station to launch the ACE Rail campaign's "*Reconnecting Bideford to the rail network*" banner.

www.railfuture.org.uk www.railfuturescotland.org.uk www.railfuturewales.org.uk
www.railwatch.org.uk

August - the Town Council heard my initial summary of some key findings and recommendations emerging from the Initial Business Case for the Torridge & North Devon Connectivity Programme, commissioned by the Tarka Rail Association (TRA) with support from Railfuture's Fighting Fund and GWR's Customer and Community Improvement Fund.

October - the Town Council received a briefing from me about the District Council's consultation for its next Strategic Plan.

December - Bideford Town Council passed this Motion: "*That this Council joins the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance as a founding member.*"

2024

February - the Town Council, as first founder member, agreed to contribute, equally with Barnstaple Town Council, to the cost of the inaugural event for the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance (NDRDA). The same meeting began with a minute's silence to honour the memory of former town and district councillor, and four-time Mayor of Bideford, Peter Christie.

March - Mayor of Bideford Jamie McKenzie welcomed representatives to the Royal Hotel for the first annual Convention of the NDRDA.

May – Still the ACE Rail campaign lead and Vice-Chair for the TRA, I updated the Town Council about the first NDRDA event.

July - the Town Council mourned the loss of former Councillor and two-time Mayor David Ratcliff, most recently in 2021-22 at the start of the ACE Rail campaign. The Council's official announcement included "*David was an advocate in the Council's engagement with the Community championing the return of a (Tarka) railway, ...*"

2025

March - the Town Council was represented in the second annual Convention of NDRDA, in Barnstaple.

July - now the newly-elected chair of Railfuture's regional branch for Devon Cornwall, I gave the Town Council a further progress update.

August - I returned to thank Bideford's Town Clerk for applying successfully through the Devon County Councillor's Locality Fund. The grant helped to fund the independent specialist reports on the Economic Dimension and initial engineering feasibility study for a Preliminary Strategic Business Case for extension of mainline rail services to Bideford.

September - the Town Council was represented in the NDRDA workshop in The Burton at Bideford, reviewing the independent specialist's reports and development of a Preliminary Strategic Business Case.

2026

January - Roger Blake, Acting Convener of the NDRDA, and I thanked the Town Council - as the first founding member of the Alliance in December 2023 - for its financial support committed in February 2022 towards the specialist work published as an item in the agenda for Torridge District Council's upcoming External Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

March - the Town Council was represented in the third annual Convention of the NDRDA, held near Eggesford station.

June - I addressed the Town Council ahead of the District Council's consideration of a report containing four recommendations for the District Council to pursue alternatives to a restored rail service to Bideford; they were not carried.

Conclusion

The railway first reached Bideford in the mid-19th century, in 1855 at Cross Parks, now Ethelwynne Browne Close in memory of the Mayor when the town lost its passenger services. The line then reached further into the town in 1872 at Station Hill, by the Royal Hotel. That railway will in time be substantially re-built in the 21st century, while retaining and improving the South West Coast Path / Tarka Trail along its corridor.

At the official opening of Okehampton Interchange on 31st July Devon County Council's Cabinet member for Climate Change, Biodiversity and Transport, Cllr Jacqi Hodgson said: *"Transformational projects do not begin with engineering plans or funding applications. They begin with a vision, a belief that communities deserve better connections and greater opportunities. Okehampton Interchange is a result of that vision."*

Meanwhile we still await the first report of a community anywhere in the country which lost its railway service yet has nevertheless continued to prosper. It is likewise beyond question that there's not one single community which had such a vision and has seen a railway service restored, only subsequently to regret it.

As now chair of the Devon & Cornwall regional branch of Railfuture, which followed this Town Council's lead in December 2023 and became the second founder member of the NDRDA, our organisation's view is that the Regeneration Board's *"expert voice in transport and infrastructure"* can guide the Board's proactive support over the next few years for developing the published Preliminary Strategic Business Case (PSBC) - for a new train service connecting Bideford with Exeter and beyond - into a formal DfT-approved Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) before the end of the present Master Plan period in 2031. Its current 'Movement Framework' for Public transport notes on page 18 *"Although some feasibility work has been undertaken on the potential for a future railway connection, the timescale for that is beyond the scope of the Bideford regeneration strategy and masterplan, so has not been factored into consideration at this stage."* An SOBC before 2031 will take forward that feasibility work, as set out in the PSBC, and if ratified officially will form the basis for securing the funding necessary for the next-stage Outline Business Case through the next-available Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). Usually carried out every three years and with one due to commence its processes in 2027, the next-available CSR may commence its processes in 2030.

I therefore commend this approach for your adoption.



Image credit: Alexander Bartell

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