

Plans to bring trains back to Bideford set for council discussion

Railfuture and the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance present Bideford-Exeter train proposals to Torridge District Council as campaign highlights economic benefits, engineering feasibility, and Tarka Trail considerations



Where it all began – December 2021 Bideford Railway Heritage Centre host OkeRail's Cllr Kev Ball (far left) and Railfuture's Roger Blake (3rd left) Photo credit: BRHC's Rob Dark

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Bideford could be reconnected to the rail network for the first time in more than 40 years, with plans being considered to link the town with Exeter and potentially beyond, bringing new opportunities for commuters, businesses, and tourism.

As part of the proposals, councillors will discuss the scheme at a Torridge District Council meeting on Wednesday 7 January.

The plan comes from Railfuture and the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance.

The preliminary business case runs to 132 pages and has been supported by funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the county council, two local town councils, and Railfuture.

Roger Blake, Railfuture's national Board Director for Infrastructure & Networks and Acting Convener of the Alliance, said the potential benefits are significant.

In his introduction to the plan, Mr Blake said a Bideford station could rank in the top 25 per cent, or even the top 20 per cent, of all mainline stations nationally, with socio-economic gains for the town and surrounding rural areas valued in the hundreds of millions of pounds.

Mr Blake said the scheme's success depends on three main factors: keeping costs low with a minimal contribution to estuary flood defences, reducing journey times and increasing service frequency on existing Exeter-Barnstaple services, and accommodating newly specified housing needs in the Barnstaple-Bideford area through the next joint Local Plan.

Reflecting on the wider context, Mr Blake said the first Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance meeting in March 2024 noted that communities across the UK which have reinstated passenger rail services have faced similar discussions.

From Okehampton in Devon to Ashington in Northumberland, and from Ebbw Vale in Wales to Galashiels in Scotland, few communities have regretted bringing trains back, he said.

By contrast, many South West towns, including Bideford, have struggled economically since services were withdrawn decades ago.

Mr Blake also addressed concerns about the Tarka Trail, which follows the former rail alignment.

Established in 1987, a few years after the track was removed, the Trail is a popular active travel route. Blake said the county council recently committed over £2 million to fill missing sections north of Braunton and that neither the council nor any successor would contemplate creating a new missing section elsewhere.

Engineering solutions will be needed to maintain an unbroken route between Bideford and Barnstaple, which Blake acknowledges will be challenging in some locations.

Looking ahead to 2026, Mr Blake said the campaign for a Bideford rail service relies on two parallel lines of support. The 36-member Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance will continue developing the business case and work to secure a six-figure sum to commission a Treasury-compliant Strategic Outline Business Case.

In addition, partner and stakeholder organisations, both current and potential, will need to promote the "Bideford bonus", the range of benefits the town and surrounding communities could see from being rail-connected again.

The council meeting will take place on Wednesday evening at Torridge District Council offices.