

Barnstaple children lobby MP Selaine over garden under threat

This week, children from Pilton Infants' School lobbied local MP Selaine Saxby about their school garden which was under threat from a house building proposal.

Following a topic about Marina Silva, a Brazilian campaigner against the destruction of the rainforest, teachers shared news with the children of the proposed build on the school site.

The Year 2 children sprang into action in a bid to save their garden. They carried out research on local wildlife and discussed the impact of building houses on the school site.

They talked about a range of issues from losing precious trees to the disruption that the building noise would have on learning.

Finally, they created banners, signs and chants in preparation for a visit from their MP.

Selaine Saxby visited the school on Friday morning, where she was met by the children protesting to save their garden.

She was then shown around the garden by a group of students who explained their concerns.

The children suggested alternative sites in Barnstaple where housing would be built and Selaine explained about current plans for housing and the bat colony in the old Shaplands site. After this, there was a nervous wait from the children as Ms Saxby considered their arguments. Finally, a decision was made and the children cheered as the MP announced that the building work wouldn't go ahead.

Mr Mortimer, acting head teacher at the school, said: "Our Year 2s are a great example of showing consideration for the world around them and standing up for their beliefs in a peaceful way. They have learned from Marina Silva who has campaigned courageously to save vast areas of the Brazilian rainforest.

"Year 2 have campaigned peacefully to Selaine Saxby, MP, to get the decision to build houses on our secret garden overturned. They explained their reasons clearly and even offered alternative ideas for where houses could be built."

Ms Saxby said about the visit: "It was wonderful to visit Pilton Infants school and meet with the very engaged and passionate students concerned

about their environment and housing.

"The school has a fantastic team around the children and in teaching them about community involvement and how they can work together to achieve their aims, goes above and beyond their normal curriculum."



North Devon MP Selaine Saxby visits Pilton Infants' School Credit: SUBMITTED



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Rail Strike - what does this mean for Northern Devon?

I sometimes wonder whether I have entered a parallel universe when so much bad and depressing news keeps appearing.

The rail strike is just another example of the turbulent times we live in.

It is perhaps however a good opportunity to try to understand what is going on here and how important this is to the north Devon economy.

The facts of what is happening clearly indicate that there will be some stark implications arising.

The current estimate is that, just in the hospitality industry alone, this walk out will cost around £540 million over the next seven days. This is based upon a 20 per cent drop in sales. In a typical June week turnover should be around £2.75 billion. For the South West this represents a loss for our most important sector of around £60 million. It is difficult to know how long these strikes will continue and how quickly the dislocation will take to rectify.

It is far from encouraging that the Prime Minister believes the Government is prepared for this standoff to last 'for months' as his Government see this as a war of attrition which they must win.

The ripple effect which concerns them is that the same level of dispute could be experienced in the

Tim Jones, chairman of North Devon Biosphere Foundation



health and education industries. Also, that wage increases are simply unaffordable. So, what is behind this and how important is the rail industry to Northern Devon?

The second question is easy to answer. Since the golden days of Brunel, Northern Devon has gained huge benefits from a vibrant rail network.

The development of core industries in Barnstaple was largely based upon the rapid deployment of new rail services – such as the Shapland and Petter factory. But for the intervention of Lord Beeching, this would and should have continued. In part, it does. The Tarka Line is one of the great success stories for regional rail travel. There are some fabulous examples of local initiatives, such as, the West Somerset line to Minehead and the amazing work being done by a dedicated team for the Lynton and Barnstaple Railway (the last narrow-gauge railway in the country).

Plans for trying to re-establish the Barnstaple/ Bideford link are far

from a pipe dream.

Even where the rail line has been removed, the infrastructure provided has been repurposed into long distance footpaths and cycleways. All of these make a valuable contribution to both business and our communities.

The reasons for the strike are complex. On the Trade Union side (RMT Union), this is a simple battle about money, faced with the current round of inflation which is effecting all our pockets. Also, threaten job losses. Behind this, however, a huge problem is exposed. During Covid rail passenger numbers fell to five per cent of previous levels.

Two years on and the network is still only operating at 80 per cent of the pre-Covid market. Recovery has been seen in the leisure trip market but commuters have been slower to return, even when faced with sky-high petrol forecourt prices.

During the pandemic the government poured in tax payers funds to support the continuation of the industry. An estimated £16.9

billion has been invested. Even before Covid, the Network has needed support from government. In the period 2015-2016 around £4 billion was paid in to support day to day operations.

It is estimated that this will need to continue but at higher levels of around £6.5-7 billion per annum.

A realistic assessment therefore has to be made of whether it is accepted that this will never be a profitable industry or whether modernisation could be introduced which would transform it into a successful commercial venture.

There can be no doubt that in order to move forward, painful modernisation will be necessary before new investment can be justified. Current working practices have been challenged as outdated and inefficient. Examples of this include resistance by the Rail Union to the introduction of new technology.

It took over a year to negotiate the introduction of a new app to message staff. There is current resistance to a new safety feature which can automatically check the rail track for defects (far more efficiently than the human eye).

The RMT insist however on continuing to use manual inspections. Inflexible working practices mean that routine track repairs currently are carried out by a whole team of workers for each job, even if this could be done by a

much smaller number of people.

There are also demarcation disputes as to which section of track is the responsibility of each maintenance crew.

The Union is still insisting on Pandemic restrictions being maintained regarding social distancing. Upskilling is also a problem with skills silos existing, meaning that workers cannot be trained for multiple skills. One industry insider commented that 'changing a plug socket' could take a team of 9'.

In summary, this is far more than a short terms dispute about wage levels. This is a watershed for an industry which needs to move on.

All of this might sound far removed from our daily lives in Northern Devon. This is however far from the truth. An efficient 21st century rail network serving Northern Devon could be transformational to many parts of our businesses and communities. This investment will not come whilst such hostile relationships exist.

While we cannot influence the outcome of this strike, we can look beyond it and start to develop some exciting ideas about a rail future for our sub region.

We have many dedicated experts who have a passion for this. We should support them and build on their great work.